FIFTEEN COMPLETE QUICK-TRIGGER STORIES

15¢

POPULAR WESTERN

MAR.

15 COMPLETE STORIES

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FEATURING THE BANDIT A Complete Action Novel By WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

•

PAINTED POST KILLERS An Action Novelette By TOM GUNN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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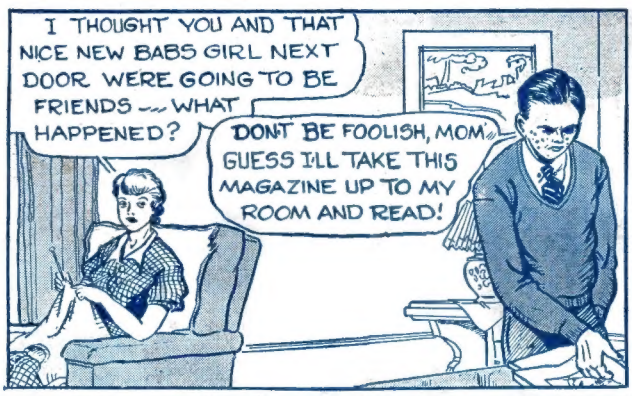
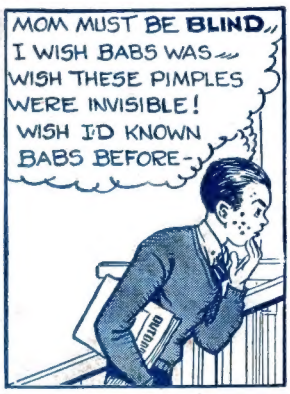
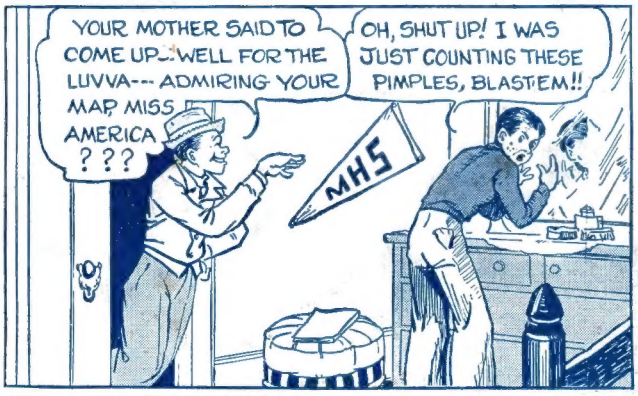
But it wasn't too late, Ben found, to mend the trouble


I THOUGHT YOU AND THAT NICE NEW BABS GIRL NEXT DOOR WERE GOING TO BE FRIENDS — WHAT HAPPENED?
DON'T BE FOOLISH, MOM. GUESS I'LL TAKE THIS MAGAZINE UP TO MY ROOM AND READ!




YOUR MOTHER SAID TO COME UP — WELL FOR THE LUVVA — ADMIRING YOUR MAP, MISS AMERICA ???
OH, SHUT UP! I WAS JUST COUNTING THESE PIMPLES, BLAST 'EM!!
MHS

DOES SEEM TO BE A LOT OF 'EM — SAY, YOU KNOW MY COUSIN RAY — HE TOOK FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST FOR HIS PIMPLES — WIPED 'EM RIGHT OFF THE OLD PHIZ
FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST DID THAT? SAY, LEAD ME TO IT!

LATER
BABS, GO TO THE SCHOOL DANCE WITH ME NEXT SATURDAY?
WHY, I SORT OF HAD A DATE, BUT — YES, I'D LOVE TO!
GOSH, I'M GLAD I GOT RID OF THOSE PIMPLES!

Don't let adolescent pimples make YOU hide away!

Between the ages 13 and 25, important glands develop. This causes disturbances throughout the body. Waste poisons in the blood irritate the skin, causing pimples.

In treating adolescent pimples, doctors prescribe Fleischmann's Yeast. This fresh yeast clears the blood of skin irritants that cause pimples. Then the pimples disappear. Eat Fleischmann's Yeast 3 times a day, before meals, until skin clears.

— clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

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POPULAR WESTERN

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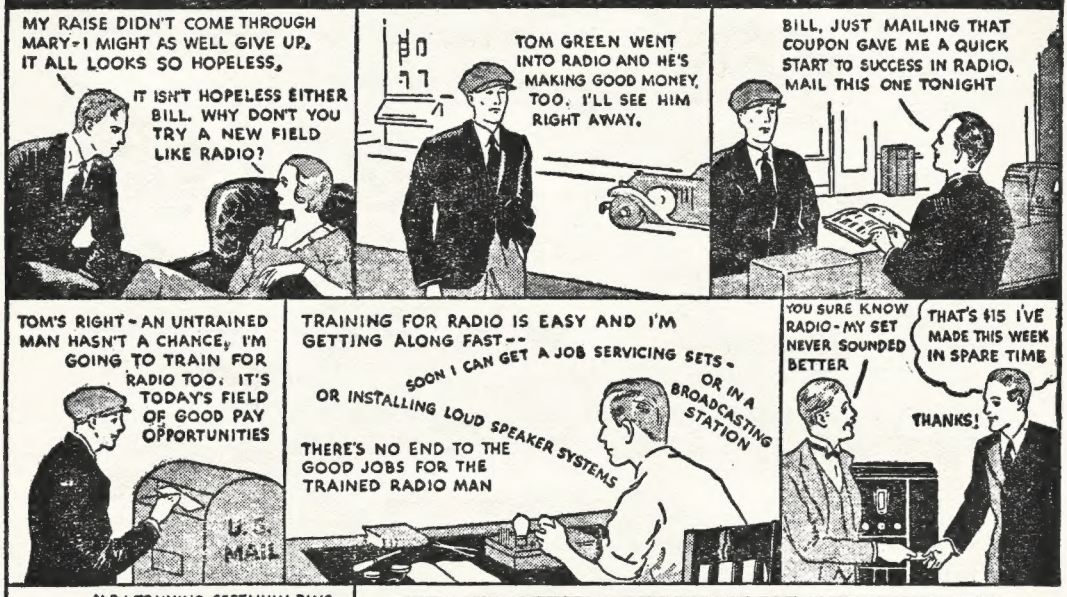
Read our companion magazines: Thrilling Western, Thrilling Ranch Stories, Thrilling Detective, Thrilling Adventures, Thrilling Love, Thrilling Mystery, G-Men, The Phantom Detective, The Lone Eagle, Sky Fighters, and Popular Detective.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!


MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY—I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS.
IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD LIKE RADIO?
TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY, TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.
BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT
TOM'S RIGHT—AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF GOOD PAY OPPORTUNITIES
U.S. MAIL
TRAINING FOR RADIO IS EASY AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST—
SOON I CAN GET A JOB SERVICING SETS—
OR IN A BROADCASTING STATION
OR INSTALLING LOUD SPEAKER SYSTEMS
THERE'S NO END TO THE GOOD JOBS FOR THE TRAINED RADIO MAN
YOU SURE KNOW RADIO—MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THAT'S $15 I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME
THANKS!

N.R.I. TRAINING CERTAINLY PAYS. OUR MONEY WORRIES ARE OVER AND WE'VE A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO.
OH BILL, IT'S WONDERFUL YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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"At the end of my first year I more than trippled the cost of my Course. Other fellows need not be afraid to start the Course for fear they cannot pay for it, because it more than pays for itself."—F. E. Sanderson, Jr., Moyock, N. C.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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(Please write plainly)

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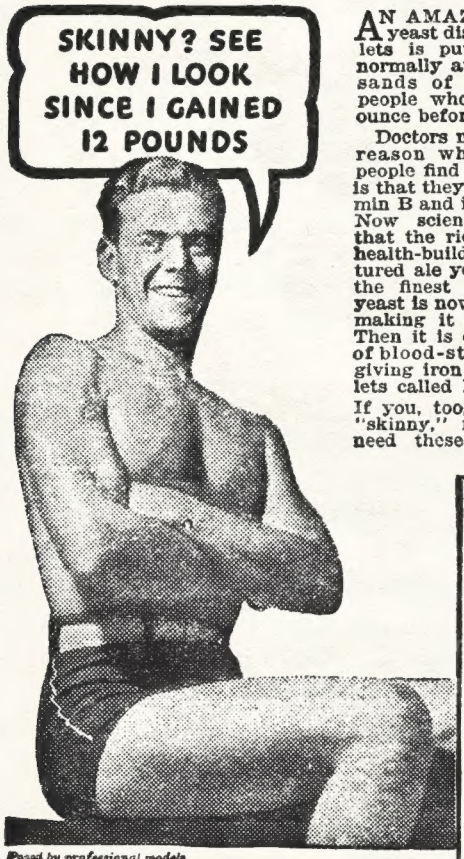
Gains of 10 to 25 pounds in a few weeks reported by users!

FIRST PACKAGE MUST INCREASE WEIGHT OR THE TRIAL IS *FREE!*

Sensational new "7-power" ale yeast giving thousands attractive pounds



Posed by professional models

AN AMAZING new "7-power" yeast discovery in pleasant tablets is putting pounds of solid, normally attractive flesh on thousands of "skinny," run-down people who never could gain an ounce before.

Doctors now know that the real reason why great numbers of people find it hard to gain weight is that they don't get enough Vitamin B and iron in their daily food. Now scientists have discovered that the richest known source of health-building Vitamin B is cultured ale yeast. By a new process the finest imported cultured ale yeast is now concentrated 7 times, making it *7 times more powerful.* Then it is combined with 3 kinds of blood-strengthening, energy-giving iron in pleasant little tablets called Ironized Yeast tablets.

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11 lbs. in 4 weeks

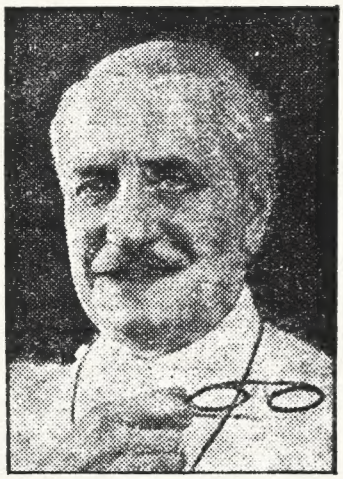
"Was in bad shape, bowels off, bad headaches, weak and tired. With Ironized Yeast I gained 11 lbs. in 4 weeks and feel strong as an ox."—Robert Thompson, Columbus, Georgia.

15 lbs. in 5 weeks

"Had lost weight and strength. Nothing helped till I took Ironized Yeast. Gained 15 lbs. in 5 weeks, feel great."—Fred Wehmann, Brooklyn, N. Y.

21 lbs., clear skin

"Was so skinny and pimply the girls never noticed me. In 12 weeks with Ironized Yeast I gained 21 lbs. and my face cleared."—Roy Rigby, De Kalb, Ill.



Results guaranteed

No matter how skinny and rundown you may be, try this wonderful new "7-power" Ironized Yeast for just a few short weeks. If you're not delighted with the results of the very first package, your money instantly refunded.

Only don't be deceived by the many cheaply prepared "Yeast and Iron" tablets sold in imitation of Ironized Yeast. These cheap counterfeits usually contain only the lowest grade of ordinary yeast and iron, and cannot possibly give the same results as the scientific Ironized Yeast formula. Be sure you get the genuine. Look for "IY" stamped on each tablet.

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To start you building up your health right away, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results guaranteed with the very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 778, Atlanta, Ga.

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(Print Clearly)

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City.....State.....

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Without obligation to me, send full information on your proposition.

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Box No. .....

City .....

State .....

Why Trained Accountants Command High Salaries

—and how ambitious men are qualifying by the La Salle Problem Method

GET this straight.

By "accountancy" we do not mean "bookkeeping." For accountancy begins where bookkeeping leaves off.

The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes* and *interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

He knows what profits should be expected from a given enterprise, how they may be increased.

He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures wherewith he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to *use* these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—the one man business cannot do without.

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Another was a drug clerk at $30 a week. Now he heads his own very successful accounting firm with an income many times as large.

A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of a great hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

A credit manager—earning $200 a month—moved up quickly to $3000, to $5000, and then to a highly profitable accounting business of his own which nets him better than $10,000 a year.

And What It Means to You

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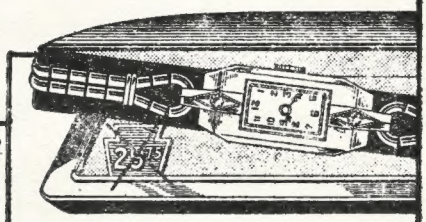

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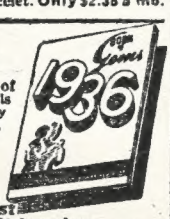

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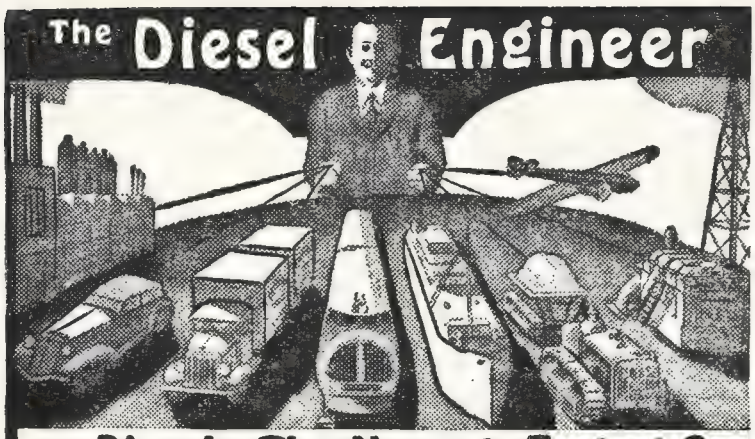

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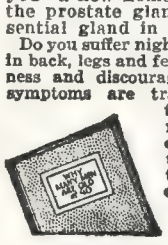

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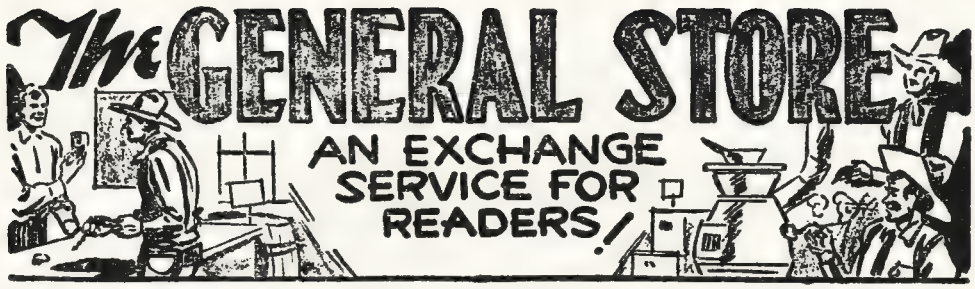

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Albert Becker	Mich.	100.00
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These exceptional earnings show the amazing possibilities of my offer. Don't let this opportunity pass—send me your name today for FREE Plans.

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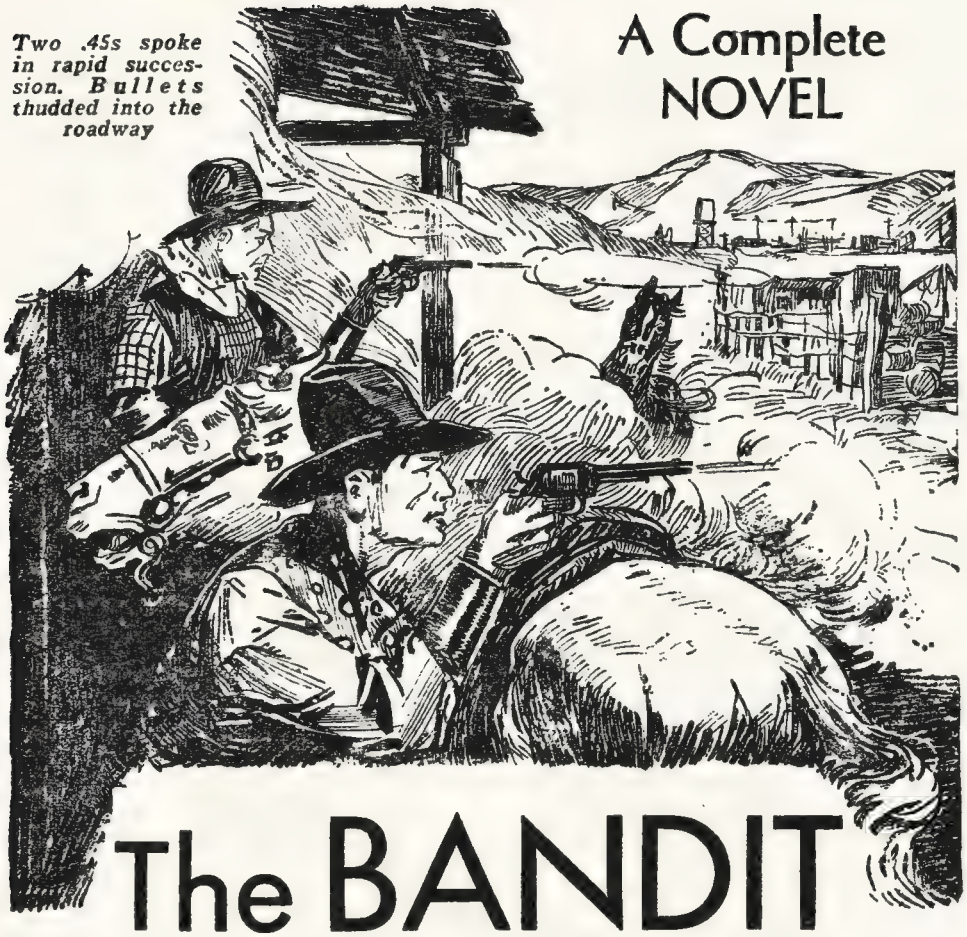


Two .45s spoke in rapid succession. Bullets thudded into the roadway

The BANDIT

Pokealong Was His Handle, and They Said He Moved Slow—but He Galloped into Lightning-Draw Action When Trouble Broke Loose on the Large Turbio Range!

By WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

Author of "Don Gringo of the Rio Grande," "Ghost Town Gold," etc.

CHAPTER I

Turbio Law

POKEALONG PETERS surveyed the single winding street of Turbio Tanks with sleepy, indolent gaze. He saw a rutted dirt road bordered on either side by plank walks, some of the newer boards exuding sticky traces of resin beneath the broiling noonday sun.

Pokealong yawned widely and commenced to think of food. Dropping his reins over a long rail, he stepped stiffly down from the saddle and stretched his long arms lazily above his head.

FARGO BAR
HOTEL
PARISHIUS

A few passersby noted his lean, angular length encased in overalls and woolen shirt, his wide-lipped, freckle-dotted countenance with its sleepy grey eyes and long nose. Pokealong's hair, under the roll-brim sombrero, was tawny and prone to fall unnoticed across his forehead. His every move bespoke weariness; it always had and always would except during moments of extreme stress.

Diagonally across the street from Pokealong, a man appeared in the doorway of the Fargo Bar, a gun raised in one hand. Pokealong blinked and shifted slightly sidewise.

THE gun roared savagely. A splinter detached itself from a wooden support at Pokealong's right and struck him on the cheek.

Pokealong swore unbelievingly. Wild cries carried along the street. Several men dashed for cover. The man in the doorway was yelling something angrily at Pokealong. Pokealong grunted and reached for the Colt weapon at his own hip.

His draw was unbelievingly fast, but to anyone watching him, the speed with which Pokealong got his gun into action was lost in the apparent awkwardness of the cowboy's motions.

Pokealong's gun belched lead and flame even as the man in the doorway of the Fargo Bar was settling himself for a second shot. From across the street came a yelp of pain; the man in the doorway disappeared and gave way before the blankly swinging doors of the saloon.

Off to the right a rifle barked. Pokealong's horse snorted with fright and pain and leaped to one side as a flying chunk of lead grazed one ear tip. Pokealong swore some more, vaulted over the tie-rail and seized the reins of the trembling beast. Again he fired, leveling one arm above the saddle.

Behind him a door slammed. Two .45s spoke in rapid succession. The rifle down the street was cracking again. Bullets thudded into the roadway and chipped fragments from the board walk.

Pokealong turned and saw a lean, dark-haired young puncher with a fighting jaw, standing just outside the restaurant. In either hand the dark-haired man gripped a six-shooter which spat vicious stabbing white fire.

"My gosh!" Pokealong drawled, "What is this—Fourth o' July or somethin'?"

"Yeah—somethin'," the dark-haired puncher grunted, momentarily giving Pokealong his attention. "Git out of this, yuh sleepy-eyed fool. This ain't yore fight— Got him, by thunder!"

The man with the rifle had come into plain sight in the middle of the road just in time to stop a slug from one of the guns held by the dark-haired puncher.

A yell of dismay rose in the Fargo Bar. Three men spilled themselves through the swinging doors. The dark-haired puncher shifted his stand, raised his guns. Bullets buzzed madly around Pokealong.

"Golly, if this keeps up, somebody will get hurt," Pokealong commented languidly. "Look here, mister, what is—"

"I'm slopin' pronto," the dark-haired one grunted grimly. "I'm much obliged for spoilin' that feller's first shot, but I ain't stayin'. Hop yore hoss and—"

The words weren't finished as the dark-haired puncher vaulted over the tie-rail and into the saddle of a waiting pony. Jabbing in his spurs, he wheeled the pony and darted off along the street followed by a hail of bullets from the three men approaching from the Fargo Bar. Apparently none of the shots took effect.

"Stop it, I say!" roared a new voice. Heavy footsteps thudded along the dusty roadway. "I'll blow the next man to hell that fires a shot!"

The three men in the road hesitated, cursing. A bulky-shouldered, grizzled man with sweeping white mustaches came panting up to Pokealong. Under one arm was cradled

a shotgun. A silver star was pinned to his flapping vest.

Pokealong holstered his gun. The three men closed in on him, all talking angrily. By this time, the dark-haired cowboy was clear of the street and still riding.

"S'help me," one of the men commenced, "I got a notion to blast this—"

"That's enough from you, Hump Crowley," the sheriff said sternly. "I'll handle this." Then turning to Pokealong, he said:

"You, stranger, what yuh got to say for yoreself?"

Pokealong grinned sheepishly. "Am I under arrest, or something, Mister Constable?"

"Constable?" the sheriff roared indignantly. "Constable! I'll have yuh know, young feller, that I'm the sheriff in this county—Sheriff Sam Gage. Constable!"

"Yessir, Mr. Gage—Sheriff," Pokealong commenced humbly. "No offence meant. I ain't done nothin'—"

"T'hell he ain't done nothin'," one of the three men growled. "He give Ed Porter a smashed shoulder. He was helpin' Matt Benton. Pro'bly Benton's hired a gunman. I demand you put this stranger under arrest, Gage."

"You, Drake Hannan, you jest hold yore hosses," the sheriff said testily. "I'll handle this—"

DRAKE HANNAN swore. He was a dark-visaged man with a lantern jaw and pale blue eyes.

"I been holdin' my horses long enough—"

"No need to rush this, boys," Sheriff Gage snapped irritably. "We'll get to the bottom of it right to once. You, feller, what did you say yore name was?"

"Peters," Pokealong said lazily. "My friends call me Pokealong. Never could figure why—"

"Mebbe they'd seen yuh move," Drake Hannan said sarcastically. "You shore couldn't be called Lightnin'."

Pokealong yawned.

"There's somethin' yuh'n' me agree on, Mr. Hannan. Say, what's this all about anyhow?"

Sheriff Gage growled disgustedly. "That's what I'm tryin' to find out, if yuh can keep awake long enough to tell us."

"Me? Awake?" from Pokealong. "I'm just as much awake as I ever am."

It took considerable questioning before the sheriff got Peters' story.

"Shucks," Pokealong drawled, between yawns, "I didn't start no trouble. I'd just stopped off for a bite of chow when a feller shows up in that Fargo doorway, 'cross the street, and takes a shot at me. Well, I thinks mebbe that's the way Turbio Tanks has of greetin' strangers passin' through, an' I returns the compliment. Porter, you say his name is? An' I smashed his shoulder? I knew somebody'd get hurt with all that shootin'. It was jest an accident. First time I ever hit anythin' in my life. I wouldn't—"

"Yuh blasted fool!" Hump Crowley broke in, "Ed Porter wa'n't shootin' at you. Neither was Crampton—the feller with the rifle."

"He plumb nicked my pony's ear—" Pokealong commenced.

"That was just an accident," Crowley snapped.

"That's what I'm maintainin' about my shootin'—"

Drake Hannan swore.

"Here's the straight of it, Sheriff. Matt Benton come out of the restaurant behind this Peters hombre and seein' Porter just leavin' the Fargo Bar throws down on him. Porter didn't even draw until—"

"Nope," Pokealong said solemnly, "yuh're mistaken, Mr. Hannan. Porter done shook his shots out first. Then a feller commenced throwin' lead from a Winchester—Crampton, you called him. It wasn't until after that this Matt Benton cut loose—"

"I took Benton's guns off'n him, not half an hour ago," the sheriff said angrily. "I wonder where he got 'em—"

"Had 'em in his hands when I saw

him last," Pokealong offered mildly.

The sheriff swore helplessly. "Well, I dunno—" he commenced.

Somebody on the rim of the crowd broke in to announce that Crampton had just died.

"I've reached my limits, Sheriff," Drake Hannan announced. "I've stood for havin' Benton rustle my stock, but I'm damned if he can commit murder—"

"I'd call it self-defense," Pokealong put in.

"Murder, dammit!" Hannan glared at Peters. Hannan raged on, "I refuse to take any more, Gage. Either yuh do something or I aim to have yuh removed from office—"

"What can I do?" The old sheriff seemed helplessly lost.

"Take in this Peters hombre. Jail him as an accomplice. He's been hired by Benton—"

"That don't hardly seem right," Gage protested. "Looks like to me as if Peters just stumbled into somethin—"

"Just my luck," Pokealong said miserably, "I'm always stumblin' into trouble. Howsomever"—and he brightened momentarily,—"I always been lucky stumblin' out again."

"Yore luck's done left you, feller," Hannan said uglily. "Do yore duty, sheriff. It's plain enough. Put him under arrest!"

Gage placed one hand on Pokealong's sleeve, "C'mon, son."

"Is yore jail far off?" Pokealong wanted to know.

"Just 'bout fifty yards down the street."

Pokealong said something about his horse.

"I'll come back an' see yore hoss is taken to the livery," the sheriff said.

"Uh-huh, I know, but fifty yards is sorta far to walk," Pokealong explained patiently.

"Oh, cripes!" disgustedly from the sheriff. "I reckon yuh're jest 'bout the laziest prisoner I ever did take in. All right, git yore crowbait."

Five minutes later, Pokealong dropped down on a cot in a narrow cell, the echoes of a clanging cell door and the sheriff's retreating footsteps echoing in his ears.

CHAPTER II

Cards on the Table

A HALF hour later when Sheriff Gage returned with a tray of food, Peters was stretched on the cell cot, his eyes closed.

"That hombre can shore snore," Gage grunted. "Bein' under arrest don't worry him none. Dang his lazy carcass." Opening the cell door, Gage placed the tray on the floor, and reclosed the door with a resounding slam.

"Chow!" he yelled abruptly. Pokealong snored blissfully on. Unbelievingly, the old sheriff shook his head and stamped away.

Pokealong opened one eye, then the other, smiled lazily.

"Seems like," he said to himself, "I heard a noise in here. Mice, mebbe."

The cell was long and narrow with solid adobe walls. Pokealong could faintly hear Gage moving about and muttering to himself.

Pokealong's meal was finished when Sheriff Gage appeared at the door, accompanied by Drake Hannan.

"Huh, yuh woke up, eh?" Gage grunted.

Pokealong yawned.

"Uh-huh. I always do."

Gage muttered something about the shame of having no ambition and added:

"Hannan wants to talk to yuh, Peters. He thinks there's a chance he may be mistaken in makin' charges against yuh."

"Shucks, that's all right," Pokealong protested. "I'm plumb comfortable here. I wouldn't want to put nobody to any trouble."

"Yuh mean yuh don't care if yuh get out or not?" Drake Hannan's jaw dropped.

"I wouldn't go to say that," Pokealong drawled. "But I been in worse jails. I don't seem to contact no animal life here and the food is good. This cot ain't bad. Now if the sheriff could only rustle up a pillow for me—"

"Go on in, Drake, and make yore *habla,*" the sheriff snapped irritably. "This *hombre* plumb riles me. Yell out when yuh want to leave."

Hannan entered the cell, the sheriff slammed the door, locked it again and stamped off, swearing to himself. Hannan seated himself and produced two long black cigars, one of which he offered to Peters.

Pokealong eyed the cigar suspiciously. "No thanks."

"Go on and take it. That's a right good weed. There ain't no firecracker in it."

Pokealong brightened a trifle but shook his head.

"Much obliged, just the same, Mister Hannan, but cigar tobacco always has a tendency to keep me awake."

"Smoke up," Hannan urged. "Mebbe it'll keep yuh awake long enough to hear my proposition."

Somewhat slowly, Peters lighted the cigar and said: "Yuh figurin' on hirin' me?"

"Mebbe so. What yuh doin' in Turbio Tanks?"

"I was jest ridin' through, lookin' for a job."

"Where yuh from?"

POKEALONG considered that, scratching his head.

"Gosh, I don't jest remember all the places I been."

"Pro'bly asleep in most of 'em," Hannan growled. There was something menacing in Hannan's voice. With considerable effort Pokealong roused to attention. His cigar had fallen to the floor, and he fumbled for his tobacco.

"I come here to get the straight of this," Hannan went on. "How well do yuh know Matt Benton?"

"Never saw him before today, just after that Porter hombre commenced shootin' and swearin' at me."

Pokealong took his gun and belt down

"He was swearin' at yuh to get yuh out of the way. I was in the Fargo Bar and heard it all."

"Then yuh know it was Porter fired the first shot," Pokealong accused. "Why did yuh try to make the sheriff believe different?"

"Yuh got it all wrong, Peters. Matt Benton will eventually git caught. He don't dare go back to his ranch, 'cause if he does I got men waitin' for him. Sheriff Gage has sent telegraph messages to all the law officers in surroundin' towns to be on the watchout for him. He can't git away. Now, when he comes to trial for killin' Crampton, I want yuh to swear that Benton started the shooting—"

"No, sir, I couldn't do that, Mr. Hannan. That wouldn't be honest."

Hannan swore at the cowboy. A flicker of resentment leaped to Peters' half-closed eyes, but he didn't say anything.

"Yuh'd like me to withdraw my charges so yuh could git out of here, wouldn't yuh?"

"Uh-huh, sort of. I got to find a job—"

"Crazy to go to work, ain't yuh?"

"Uh-huh, I feel I am, too. But I'm broke. I got to get some money someplace."

"Yuh better accept my offer then. All yuh got to do is promise to swear that Benton started the shooting, when the time comes. That'll git yuh out of here and give yuh a job with my DH outfit. Mebbe yuh'll get a chance to earn some extra money too."

"What yuh got against Benton?"

"Damn him!" Hannan burst out. "Benton and his outfit has rustled me ragged. He's a crook. Yuh don't like crooks, do yuh?"

"Not none. But I ain't got no quarrel with Benton. It wouldn't be fair to say he started that fight—"

"Cripes!" Hannan was losing patience. "Look here, Peters, if I could prove to yuh that Benton was a cold-blooded thief and murderer, yuh'd be willin' to swear to a little lie just so's Benton would get his just desserts, wouldn't yuh?"

"Well, ye-es, mebbe."

"Look here." Hannan moved closer to Peters. "Yuh heard about that Ophir payroll robbery, didn't yuh?"

Pokealong couldn't remember if he had or not. Hannan was patient.

"Two months ago the stage carrying the Golden Ophir Mine payroll was held up by a lone bandit. The bandit never give the driver a chance, shot him down without warnin'. Then he lit out with the strong box which held the money. That bandit was Matt Benton."

"Yuh got proof of this?"

"Pretty good proof."

"Why don't yuh tell the sheriff?"

"I ain't ready to give him the story yet. But once we get Benton to trial for the murder of Crampton, I'll be able to— Look here, Peters, now will yuh testify that Benton started that fight today? Yuh'll be doin' justice a good turn."

Pokealong yawned widely.

"I'd shore like to help yuh, Mr. Hannan, but it still don't seem right, somehow to swear to a lie."

Hannan swore wrathfully. "I'm gettin' mighty tired—"

"Yeah. Me, too."

Hannan cursed some more.

"Yuh'll do as I say, Percival Edmund Peters, or yuh'll find yoreself in a mighty tight—"

"My name's Pokealong—" Peters commenced rather hastily.

"*Alias* Pokealong," Hannan said mockingly, "according to this—"

BREAKING off, he pulled from a pocket a "Wanted" bill.

"What's that?" Peters asked in some alarm.

"As if yuh didn't know," Hannan sneered. He glanced again at the bill, reading half aloud: "One thousand dollars reward—Percival Edmund Peters, alias Pokealong—bank bandit—robbery of Conejo City Savings Bank—killed the night watchman—Peters is a tough character—don't be misled by his sleepy manner—"

"Gosh, that ain't me."

"T'hell it ain't. This has got yore

description and everything. Says you probably got more'n one killin' on yore record. Says yore gun has got three notches cut—"

"Well, it ain't my gun—"

"Don't lie, Peters. I don't fool easy. I already took a look at yore forty-five, hangin' in the sheriff's office. It's got three notches cut—"

"Wait, I can explain that." Peters appeared visibly shaken. "Yuh see, one time I was in a poker game with another feller. We didn't have any money to bet, but he lost and he had to stand my trick night-hawkin' the herd for three nights runnin'. I cut them three notches so I wouldn't forget—"

Hannan laughed scornfully.

"It don't go down, Peters."

POKEALONG gulped. "I was afraid it wouldn't," he acknowledged miserably. "Where did yuh git that reward bill?"

"Tacked on the sheriff's wall, along with about fifty others. Gage never bothers to read 'em when they come in, I reckon. Either that, or he's forgot what he read. Old Sam Gage is gettin' too old for this job of sheriffin'—"

"Yuh tell him about this bill?"

Hannan shook his head.

"Ain't I tryin' to tell yuh I want to be friendly, Peters. I got a hunch yuh're goin' to fit in fine on the DH spread."

"Mebbe so." Peters looked uncomfortable. "Yuh shore talk convincin'. Still, I sort of hate to swear anythin' against Benton. He never harmed me."

"Never harmed yuh? Didn't he git yuh into a fight, and then leave yuh behind while he run off. Now all yuh got to do is follow my directions and yuh'll be out of here. I'll tear up this reward bill—"

Pokealong gulped.

"Gosh, I don't want to hurt Benton none, but a feller has to think of himself. Give me until tomorrow morning to think it over."

"Shore," Hannan agreed heartily. "Only"—and his words were hard—"yuh think the way I want yuh to, see?"

After Gage had let Hannan out, Pokealong called the sheriff back.

"What yuh want now?" he asked gruffly.

"Say, Sheriff, what sort of a feller is Drake Hannan?"

Gage stiffened a trifle. "What do yuh mean?"

"Is he a man to trust? He's offered to withdraw his charges and git me out of here— Well, look. Say yuh had a roll of money. Would yuh be willin' to go away and leave it in Hannan's care?"

"Not by a jugful!" Gage snapped. "Say, what yuh gettin' at?"

"Nev' mind, I already got there," Pokealong drawled. "Yuh know anythin' against Hannan?"

"Not a damn thing I can put a finger on. 'Course, there's Benton's unfounded charges— Leastwise, Matt ain't never been able to offer proof that Hannan was rustlin' him— Say, what yuh tryin' to find out?"

"Whether I'd ought to take Hannan up on his offer."

Sam Gage chewed meditatively on a quid of tobacco. "Yuh must be givin' somethin' pretty good in return," he said.

"Mebbe."

"Yore right eye at least," Gage grunted. "Now, look here, son, I don't know what sort of deal Hannan is tryin' to make but I don't like him, personal, nor his crew."

Peters lounged against the cell door, one shoulder close to the sheriff's.

"What's yore ideas about Matt Benton?"

This time there was no evasion about the old sheriff's reply.

"I've always thought Matt was a fine boy. I wished I could have helped him when he came to me with certain charges, but, shucks, I've got to have proof to take action. No gittin' away from the fact there's bad blood between the DH and Matt's Spur spread. I've done all I could to keep down trouble. 'Course, this business today— Say, are yuh certain

shore that Porter and Crampton fired first?"

Pokealong shrugged evasive shoulders.

"Yuh wouldn't say that Matt Benton was the bandit in the Golden Ophir holdup, then?"

"What gives you that idea? Did Hannan— If I thought Hannan said—" Gage growled. "No sir, Matt Benton couldn't have done nothin' of that kind. It ain't in him to kill, cold-blooded, the way that holdup was pulled. Besides, the signs showed three bandits. There wa'n't no passengers aboard the stage and that stage never carried a guard. Shucks! We never had no holdup men over this way before. Nope, son, Matt Benton ain't no more bandit than yuh be."

Pokealong smiled lazily. "Don't be too shore about me."

Sam Gage snorted scornfully.

"Peters, yuh ain't got gumption enough to be a bandit. 'Bout the only thing I figger yuh could steal is cat-naps."

"Ask Hannan if he ain't heard of me as a bandit," Pokealong said very boldly.

"I will not," Gage said emphatically. "What kind of a game yuh tryin' to pull on me? Git me to ask Hannan that so he'll have the laugh on me, eh? Nope, not me. I wouldn't even breathe it to him."

"I thought mebbe yuh wouldn't." Pokealong smiled lazily and yawned. "Reckon I'll catch me a little nap. It's past siesta time."

Gage looked wonderingly at the cowboy.

"Damn if yuh ain't the dangdest hombre for shut-eye I ever see. Well, sleep hearty, son. If yuh want anythin', within reason, tonight, just sing out. I'll be sleepin' on the cot in my office."

"I shore hope yuh get a good sleep," Pokealong drawled. "I sorta hope to make an escape tonight."

"Yeah, I bet yuh do."

The sheriff's laughter echoed down the corridor as Pokealong turned to his cot.

CHAPTER III

Changed Brands

HOURS later, Pokealong stirred on his cot. It was well after midnight. Dimly, through the closed door of the sheriff's office came the sounds of regular snoring.

Pokealong raised up on one elbow and listened. Again, there came that faint noise of small particles falling to the floor. Somebody, outside the jail, was endeavoring to attract Pokealong's attention by throwing gravel through the cell windows.

Pokealong got to his feet, approached the nearest window and peered cautiously around the edge. A spattering of gravel struck his nose.

"Yuh could create more damage with a shovel mebbe," Pokealong said, softly.

"Oh." Then, after a moment's silence, the voice said, "I didn't know yuh was awake."

Matt Benton stood outside the cell, his dark form silhouetted against the moonlit earth.

"I didn't want yuh to think I'd left yuh flat. I run out today, 'cause Hannan and his hellions would have mowed me down if I hadn't. I was right shore they wouldn't hurt you, 'specially when I see Sheriff Gage comin' on the run. But I'm much obliged for—"

"Did yuh wake me up to make a speech? Yuh should have better sense. It's worth yore life to enter town."

"Yuh ain't tellin' me nothin'," Matt said bitterly. "I got a coupla friends here who told me what happened. But I owe yuh somethin'. I come to help yuh escape."

"I don't know as I want to," Pokealong said languidly. "I been in worse jails."

"Up with 'em, Peters," Nichols snapped. "Reach high!"

"Look here, do yuh mean to say yuh want to stay in jail, after me comin' in to—"

"All right, all right," Pokealong grumbled, "now that yuh've disturbed my rest, I suppose I might as well listen. How were yuh figurin' to git me out?"

Benton gestured toward a clump of low-hanging cottonwood trees back of the jail building.

"My hoss is back there. I figure I can tie my riata to those bars and jerk 'em loose from the adobe."

"Don't yuh know," Pokealong said sternly, "that that would be destroyin' public property. Yuh got enough charges against yuh now, 'thout bustin' up—"

Benton swore impatiently.

"All right, yuh locoed rannie. I've done my best. I reckon I'll be slopin'."

"Shucks," Pokealong drawled, "I can git out any time I want to—"

"T'hell yuh can. How do yuh figure that—?"

Pokealong held a long key up to the light.

"This'll urlock my cell," he smiled lazily.

Benton's jaw dropped. "My gosh! How in time did yuh—"

Pokealong yawned.

"Me'n the sheriff was havin' a little talk today. We was both leanin' against my cell door. Somehow or other my hand just happened to reach

between the bars and into his pocket. Yuh know I ain't no regular pickpocket, but I sort of thought this key might come handy."

Benton chuckled. "In that case, I'll be slopin'."

"Yeah, yuh better. Somebody might hear us. But don't slope no farther than those cottonwoods. I'll be out and talk to yuh for a spell. Wait for me."

Pokealong catfooted to the cell door, reached through the bars, and inserted the key into the heavy lock. The door opened noiselessly. Pokealong slipped off his boots and stepped into the corridor. Six paces brought him to the sheriff's office.

Across the room, the sheriff lay stretched on his cot, snoring rhythmically. Guns and belts hung on a

row of wooden pegs driven into one wall. Pokealong recognized his own outfit and lifted it down. On the adjoining peg, hung two belts and a pair of holstered .45s tagged "Benton." These, too, Pokealong took down.

The next instant he stepped into the deserted street and closed the door softly behind him.

A moment later he had joined Benton in the gloom beneath the cottonwoods.

"C'mon, we better git goin'," Benton whispered as Peters gave him his guns. "My hoss will carry double. Unless yuh want to take a chance on gittin' yores from the livery. I'll stick and help if yuh do—"

"Let's sit down." Peters dropped to the earth, his back against a tree trunk.

"My gosh, Peters, we got to move fast!"

"Not me. Too much effort to move fast. I want to talk to yuh. I won't keep yuh but a minute, then yuh can go."

"Ain't *yuh* leavin'?"

"Not right to once."

"Yuh're crazy!"

"Lots of folk think that," Pokealong yawned. "If it keeps up I'll believe 'em. C'mon, sit down."

Reluctantly, Benton seated himself at Peters' side.

"Now what started this fight between yuh and Hannan?"

"He's trying to break me, run me out of the country. He's rustled my cows—"

"HANNAN claims yore outfit has been stealin' him blind."

"The dirty sidewinder! *My* outfit! I ain't got any outfit. There's just my sister, Polly, and me, now. I had a young Mexican working for me, but somebody shot him a week ago—"

"Kill him?"

"I reckon he'll pull through. He's in town now, at the doctor's. Yuh see, Peters, I'd just got nicely going. Only had about five hundred cows under my Spur iron. Hannan didn't bother me, until he learned I'd filed on some good water. It was public domain. I'm proving up—with Polly's help. Hannan had neglected to file on it himself. Now he's sore. His outfit has tried to pick a fight on every occasion. He's rustled cows—"

"Yuh got proof?"

"Got it today. Before, I only suspected it, but I couldn't convince Sheriff Gage with my suspicions. Yuh see I'd lost, roughly, about fifty cows. Then I learned through a friend that Hannan had sold fifty head below the Border."

"Them cows bear yore iron?"

"They were burned with Hannan's DH— Now, wait. Today I was cutting across my range. I noticed a

rider who looked mighty like Crampton. I didn't pay much attention to that until I'd dipped down into a hollow and found the ashes of a small fire. I circled wide around the spot where the fire was and come on a yearlin' steer that had been recent branded with the DH iron."

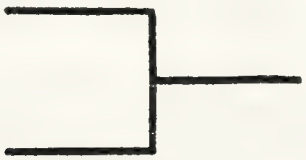
"Provin' what?"

"I took a chance, shot the yearlin' and skinned out the brand. The underside of the hide showed how my Spur brand had been blotted into a DH. That satisfy yuh?"

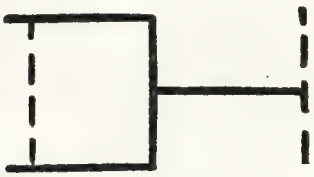
Pokealong considered.

"I reckon it could be done," he nodded.

"Hell's bells, yes! Look here—" Benton moved away from the tree to a point where a wide band of moonlight tunneled down through the leafy branches of the cottonwoods. Plucking up a small, sharp fragment of rock he quickly sketched in the gravelly earth the outlines of his Spur brand:



"There's my iron, see?" Benton said. "Now look, all the DH outfit has to do is add certain burns to convert my brand into a DH." Benton quickly supplied the necessary lines. "There, is that proof enough for yuh?"



"Proof aplenty," Pokealong Peters drawled. "How about earmarks?"

"I split, right and left," Benton said grimly. "The DH gotches right and left—in other words, Hannan just slices off all evidence of my ownership!"

CHAPTER IV

Shot in the Dark

WITH one booted foot, Matt Benton scuffed out the drawing. Neither man spoke as they moved back to the trunk of the tree. Pokealong Peters fumbled for cigarette papers, rolled a smoke and then passed the sack to Benton.

The two men smoked in silence a few moments. Finally, Peters said:

"What did yuh do with that skinned-out section of hide yuh mentioned?"

"A lot depends on that hide, Peters. After all, I don't know yuh very well, or what yuh're doin' here, or—"

Pokealong smiled wryly.

"All right, let it pass. Have yuh said anythin' to Hannan about it?"

"Hannan knows about it. After I'd took that piece of hide back to my place—"

"And give it to yore sister to hide—"

"And give it to Polly to hide—" Benton stopped abruptly and bit his lip. "Peters, how in the devil did yuh know that?"

Pokealong chuckled.

"Guessed it. No matter how hard anybody might crowd yuh, personal, lookin' for that hide, folks don't generally bother a girl, or her room. Now, lemme see, between a spring and a mattress would be a logical place to conceal a thing like that. Still, I dunno. No girl is goin' to keep a chunk of fresh hide in her bed. Nope, that ain't it. Say, is there a carpet in yore sister's room? Now a square of hide, flat under a carpet, with, mebbe, a dresser standin' on it—"

Benton swore softly. "Damn yuh, Peters—"

"My friends call me Pokey—"

"There ain't nothin' Pokey about

you. Yuh ain't as sleepy as yuh look."

Pokealong yawned. "I sometimes suspect that myself, but still, yuh can't always be shore—"

"Who the devil *are* you?"

Peters evaded that. "How do yuh know Hannan knows about that skinned-out hide?"

"I come into town just before noon. The first man I saw was Crampton. I accused him of blottin' my brand, told him about that piece of hide. He looked guilty as hell. I could see it in his face. Tried to bluster it out. We had some words. Sheriff Gage come along about that time. To stop a fight he made me give up my guns. Took Crampton's too. I'm shore obliged to yuh for bringin' my Colts out to me."

"You got 'em. Git on with yore story."

"After Crampton and I had give up our guns, I see him headin' for the Fargo Bar which same is the DH hangout. I went to the Turbio Restaurant. I finished dinner and then started out. Jest as I stepped out the door, Ed Porter cuts loose with his gun. Lucky he missed. Then *you* got into the fight. That stalled things off until I could slip back and borrow Lee Rumler's guns. He's a friend o' mine—runs the restaurant. Then Crampton—"

"I know the rest. Crampton's dead. Gage has sent word out to be on the watch for you—"

"I know. Lee told me what had happened. Today I headed for the ranch, but didn't dare go there. Just by luck I spotted Hump Crowley and Nick Uhlmann hid in the brush a short distance from the house, waitin' for me. They didn't see me. Looks like I'm on the dodge. Now I can return Lee's guns—"

"And git out of town as fast as yore hoss will carry yuh."

The clouds shielding the moon had broken momentarily and then closed again, but not before Pokealong had noticed a shadowy figure rounding the corner of the jail building.

The man stopped, looked all around, then moved toward one of the windows opening into Peters' cell.

Pokealong placed his lips close to Benton's right ear.

"Yuh git ready to slope. Let me handle this," he said, almost soundlessly. "It won't make so much difference if I have to plug me a coyote—"

The man was close to the cell window now, his head framed against the barred opening. Cautiously, he pulled a gun from his holster, started to poke it through the bars—

And right then, Matt Benton sneezed. Loudly.

The unknown man paused, stiffened, listening.

Pokealong chuckled loud. "Better hold yore gunfire, *hombre*, and reach high," he said. "Yuh're covered!"

The man at the cell window whirled toward the trees like a flash. His hand snapped up. An orange flash of fire and smoke tore the night wide open!

The shot came so suddenly, Pokealong ducked involuntarily as the leaden slug ripped into the tree trunk at his right. Pokealong's right hand dipped down, jerked up, blazing flame and hot lead. Three shots ripped from the shadows among the trees.

But the unknown had already darted in swift zigzag steps toward the street. Pokealong fired again, but the man kept going until he had rounded the corner of the jail. An instant later the drumming of horse's hoofs sounded along the street.

"Clean getaway," Pokealong Peters grunted calmly. "I was pretty shore I winged him—"

"BUT who was he? What was he doin'?"

"The first, I don't know. I can make a strong guess regardin' the second. Matt, you got to slope *pronto* out of here."

Doors and windows banged along the street. Excited cries were heard in the near vicinity.

"Git goin'! Grab yore hoss. Git out of Turbio Tanks," Pokealong repeated. "You leave this to me. I'll

be all right. Go on, now. Pronto!"

A saddle squeaked in the darkness. A horse moved as quietly as possible through the brush. The sounds of drumming hoofbeats could still be heard at the far end of town.

The front door of the jail banged open. The old sheriff came galloping around the corner of the jail building.

Pokealong chuckled to himself. Several hurriedly dressed citizens came dashing up to the jail. Pokealong stepped boldly out from the trees. No one paid him any attention. Unnoticed, Pokealong slipped inside the jail, crept into the corridor. The key to his cell was still in the lock. Darting into the cell, he closed the door, turned the key and dropped down on the cot.

From the front of the jail a door banged and the sheriff came stumbling along, carrying a lamp and muttering to himself.

Pokealong called out:

"Hey, what's all this noise? Can't you let a feller get his sleep?"

"Yuh're still there, eh?" Relief was eloquent in the sheriff's tone as he peered through the bars of the door. He tried the door, found it locked, then swore when he discovered the key sticking in the lock.

"I'm shore gettin' forgetful," he groaned. "Do yuh know yuh could have unlocked yoreself and—"

"Ain't interested in goin' no place" —Pokealong was sitting upon the bed now, blinking solemnly at the sheriff "—that I couldn't go legal like. That might place yuh in a bad light, Sheriff. What's the idea of wakin' me up by throwin' guns through my window—?"

"Guns? Guns!" Gage cried excitedly. "What do yuh mean?"

"A gun, anyhow," Pokealong said. Rising to his feet he passed his gun and belt through the bars.

"And I heard some shots," Pokealong was explaining glibly, "then somebody tossed this gun through the window and nearly hit me—hey, that's *my own gun*, ain't it? Let me have a look!"

"I will in a cat's eye," Gage said grimly, snatching the weapon through the bars. "Somebody was tryin' to help yuh escape, that's what."

Pokealong said innocently, "Mr. Hannan was sort of anxious to git me out of here today."

"But how did he git yore gun—wait!"

The sheriff dashed back to his office, made a quick examination and returned to the cell door swearing.

"It's Matt Benton, that's who it was. He must have come in my office sometime when I wasn't there and stole his guns and yore'n. Dang his hide, I'd like to—"

"Listen, Sheriff," Pokealong complained, "I'm missin' my sleep. Let's talk it over in the mornin'. And see if you can't quiet that crowd in the street. Them folks is plumb disturbin'."

"All right, son, I'll get back to my office. An'—an'—I'm much obliged for you not escapin' when you had a chance."

BUT Pokealong was already back on his cot, pulling the blanket over him.

"Hey!" Gage exclaimed. He had been examining Pokealong's gun. "This here weapon of yore'n is empty. Did *you* do that shootin'?"

"Me?" innocently. "I should say not. I was too scared to put my head out from under the blanket when that shootin' started."

"How yuh explainin' this empty gun?" sternly.

"Yuh ain't forgot, have yuh, that I done some firin' today? Yuh took my gun away before I had a chance to reload—"

"Shore, shore," Gage said hastily. "I 'member now. Yore gun was empty. Dang that Matt Benton, comin' inter my office and takin' his guns—"

"Me, I sort of doubt it was Matt," Peters said lazily.

"What do yuh mean?"

"Well," Peters said glibly. "After that gun was flung into my cell I got up and looked out of the window. I

coulda swore it was Drake Hannon I saw runnin' away—"

"Hannan *was* sort of anxious to get you out of jail seems like—" Gage ruminated.

"Uh-huh, and there's bad blood between him and Benton. Mebbe it was him took Matt's guns—"

"So help me Hanner!" Gage swore wrathfully, "I'll pick a bone with Mister Drake Hannan in th' mornin'. I'll find out just where he was—"

"I wouldn't, was I you." Pokealong yawned widely.

Gage snapped, "Why not?"

"Give a steer enough throw-rope and it'll tangle itself plenty," Pokealong said cryptically.

"What? Huh? Oh! I see. You mean I'm to keep still and let's see what sort of move Hannan makes. Peters, sometimes, you don't act so dumb."

"Uh-huh, I know. But it ain't often, is it?"

"Not very. Say, I was thinkin'—"

A long snore interrupted the words. Gage swore, then grumblingly turned back toward his office.

CHAPTER V

Trouble Brews

DRAKE HANNAN lounged against the bar in the Fargo Saloon. Except for the bartender, polishing glasses at one end, Hannan was the only occupant of the building.

Hannan shifted position, limping slightly as he did so, and called for another drink. His hand dropped to his right thigh and tenderly felt of a bump under his trouser leg.

Hoofbeats were heard outside, the creaking of saddle leather. A rider was pulling up before the Fargo Bar.

"Mebbe that's yore foreman now," the barkeep commented. "Yeah, that's him—Luke Nichols in the flesh."

"'Bout time he got here," Hannan growled.

The swinging doors parted to allow the entrance of Luke Nichols, a lean, hard-faced individual in worn range togs and a battered *sombrero.* A gun was slung low on his right hip. He nodded greeting to Hannan as he dragged his spurs up to the bar. The bartender set out a second glass. Drinks were poured and consumed.

"Let's step outside," Hannan said. "Too many long ears hereabouts."

Hannan led the way to the doorway. The two men stepped outside and found chairs under the wooden awning that fronted the Fargo Bar.

"Laig frettin' yuh much?" Nichols wanted to know.

"What do *you* think?" Hannan half snarled. "If *you'd* had a slug of lead—"

"Aw, cripes! It ain't much more'n a scratch. I ought to know; I bandaged it as soon as you got to the ranch last night. You learned yet who done it?"

Hannan shook his head.

"Yuh could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard that sneeze and then that *hombre* tellin' me to stick 'em up— Dammit, I still think that sounded like Peters' voice—"

"Yuh talked to Peters this mornin'?"

"No, not yet. I talked to the sheriff though. He swears Peters wasn't out of the cell. I pumped him dry with a lot of roundabout questions. I did find out that Benton's guns had been took out of Gage's office—"

"That'll make it look like it was Benton. But I don't know yet what yore idea was in tryin' to rub out Peters."

"I already explained that. He's such a stubborn idiot, and I ain't sure yet he'll be willin' to swear it was Benton started that fight yesterday."

"Yuh just figgered to kill off some evidence, eh?"

"Yuh get the idea. I'm glad now it didn't work. I've got a new plan,

and if Peters is willin' to leave jail on the conditions I offer—"

"What yuh figurin' to do with him?"

"I'll tell yuh in a minute. First, did yuh ride out this mornin' and see Crowley and Uhlmann?"

"What did yuh think I rode to the Spur for? Shore, I saw 'em. They was still hid in the brush, not far from the house. Said they ain't seen hide nor hair of Benton, but they're ready to nab him—dead or alive—if he shows up—"

"Yuh told 'em about that skinned-out brand?"

Nichols nodded. "Passed on the order as comin' from you. This afternoon, providin' Benton don't show up, they're to go to the house and question the girl, try and find out if she knows where it is—"

"Told 'em not to pull any rough stuff on Benton's sister, didn't yuh?"

"Aw, they won't hurt the girl—"

"I'm askin'," Hannan snapped.

Nichols laughed shortly. "What's the matter, you gone sweet on that heifer, Drake?"

"I don't care that much what happens to her," Hannan growled. He snapped his fingers.

Nichols laughed. Then looked puzzled. "What's wrong, Drake?"

"*That* is, dammit!" Drake Hannan snarled, gesturing toward the silver ring through which the ends of Nichols' neckerchief had been pulled. It was a rather handsome ring, of Indian design, set with a large turquoise.

"AW, this ain't nothin' to worry about," Nichols evaded.

"Yuh're gettin' dumb as hell," Hannan said savagely. "You'll land us all in the pen."

"How about yoreself?" Nichols retorted. "Yuh sent that bracelet—"

"Cripes 'mighty! That was sent out of the county. I got some sense. I want yuh to take that thing off!"

"All right, yuh can make Crowley take his off, too."

Hannan swore a lurid stream.

"I didn't know Crowley was—"

"Yeah, he is, on the little finger of his right hand."

Hannan cursed some more.

"By heaven, I'll move that stuff where nobody won't know—"

"Yuh ain't no more right to move it than any of us," Nichols snapped. "If yuh want to make trouble over somethin' that the county has just about forgot—" He broke off suddenly, cooled down. "Look here, Drake, there ain't no use yuh and me scrappin'. Yuh wanted certain things done. I've done 'em. What's yore next move?"

Hannan sobered and commenced to talk in low, earnest tones. Nichols' eyes gleamed with interest. Two or three times he interrupted to ask questions.

"I got a hunch that will work out," Hannan concluded.

"It might, at that," Nichols said slowly. "It all depends on whether Peters will be willin' to hire on with the DH."

"I'm figgerin' he will."

"The idea bein', of course," Nichols said slowly, "to git him to bury the box, and then tie him in with Benton in the banditing—"

"And with this reward bill for Peters to tie him tighter, we can collect the reward on his head. We'll hang 'em both higher'n kites—"

"There's just one thing bothering me," Nichols said dubiously. "I won't feel safe until we learn who it was threw lead at yuh, at the jail last night. I'm afeared there's some third party goin' to cut in, or somethin'. Yuh shore yuh couldn't see—"

"Cripes, ain't I told you they was back in the shadows—"

"They?"

"Well, I dunno, Luke, only I kind of felt there was two *hombres* there. Howsomever, I've come to the conclusion that it was Benton. Pro'bly some friend with him—"

"Shore they didn't recognize you?"

"I ain't positive shore of nothin', but it seems if I'd been recognized, I'd heard somethin' from it by this time. It just means that we got to work fast to get our plans finished.

Now, you quit worryin'. I'm goin' down to the jail."

CHAPTER VI

New Hand at the DH

POKEALONG was dozing when the sheriff brought Hannan to the cell door.

"Wake up, Lightnin'," Gage said sarcastically. "Here's Hannan come to talk to you again."

He let Hannan into the cell, relocked the door and tramped back to the office.

"Well, you come to a decision? You was goin' to let me know this mornin'," Hannan said.

"I been thinkin' about that reward bill," Peters said lazily. "Looks like I better take a job with you. 'Sides, this cell is too noisy. Ain't as comfortable as I thought it would be. There was a heap of shootin' around here last night. It disturbed my rest somethin' awful. Made me nervous. Yuh see, I got to thinkin' about how yuh didn't feel very friendly to me yesterday and mebbe you or one of yore hands was takin' them shots at me."

"What made yuh think that? Hell, Peters, I want to be yore friend. I like yuh."

"That's fine." Peters appeared relieved.

"I can't imagine what give you such an idea," Hannan shook his head slowly. "You didn't look out of yore window and imagine you saw me, did you?"

"Nope. But I kind of thought the feller I did see resembled that Benton hombre."

"Yuh did?" Hannan's tones were eager, his face lighted up. "Well, that's somethin'. Remember to tell the sheriff it was Benton you saw."

Hannan went to the cell door and hailed Gage. When the sheriff came back to the cell, Hannan said: "Why can't yuh let us out, Sam. I'm withdrawing charges I intended to make against Peters. He's goin' to take a job with the DH. And here's somethin' else—Matt Benton tried to help Peters escape last night."

"Well, by cripes," Gage said, angrily. "Why didn't yuh tell me before?"

Pokealong shrugged indolent shoulders. "I dunno, reckon it must have slipped my mind."

The sheriff grumpily unlocked the cell door, then preceded Peters and Hannan to the office where he took down from the wooden peg Peters' belt and holstered .45.

"That looks like a pretty good gun," Hannan said suddenly. "Let's have a look at it."

He examined the gun, then looked sharply at Peters.

"Five chambers with cartridges, hammer restin' on an empty shell. How many shots did yuh fire yesterday, Peters?"

Pokealong yawned. "Danged if I know—"

Gage cut in:

"There, dang it, I should of took note of that, but I didn't."

"What yuh talkin' about?" Hannan demanded.

"I took out the empties and cleaned the gun for Peters, this mornin'," the sheriff explained, "then reloaded."

"Much obliged," Peters drawled. His sleepy eyes met and held the sheriff's a moment. Gage winked solemnly.

Hannan was still looking at the gun. "Did yuh notice, Sheriff," he asked, "that Peters' gun butt has got three notches cut in it?"

"I don't see no call to bring that up," Peters said, displaying a certain indignation.

"Yeah, I noticed," Gage nodded. "Reckon that it don't mean nothin' though. I've knowed fellers to notch just for makin' hits on tincans or some other mark."

"Well, keep it in mind, anyhow," Hannan said meaningly. He looked at Peters, a sneering smile on his lips.

Pokealong looked uncomfortable.

"Are we goin' to stand here talkin' all day? I'm gettin' hungry. I got to get my hoss, too."

"Yore hoss is down to the livery," Gage said. "I'll go along with you. You couldn't get it without I signed a release, and I'd sooner go down there than write out a order."

Pokealong buckled on belt and gun and the three men headed for the livery, Pokealong lagging behind and trying, without success, to convince the sheriff his pony should be brought to him.

Five minutes later, Pokealong was pulling his pony to a stop before the Fargo Bar hitchrack. Luke Nichols lifted himself out of a chair.

"Peters, shake hands with Luke Nichols—my foreman and yore boss," Hannan said, joining them.

Pokealong said in tired tones:

"Pleased to make yore acquaintance, Mr. Nichols." He put out a languid hand.

Nichols came close to Pokealong's horse and shook hands. There was contempt in his eyes as he let Peters' hand drop, but in a voice of assumed cordiality he asked: "Ain't yuh goin' to climb down? Th' Fargo's got some good likker and I'm due to buy."

Pokealong lifted a heavy-lidded gaze to the swinging doors of the Fargo Bar.

"I reckon not," he said apologetically. "I'm plumb weary and that seems sort of far to go for a drink. Could yuh get the barkeep to bring it out, mebbe?"

NICHOLS' eyes opened in unbelief. "Cripes 'mighty—"

"I dunno though," Peters cut in. He seemed uncertain. "It must be nigh to dinner time. Mebbe I better 'light."

"Yuh stay in yore saddle," Hannan said abruptly. "You and Nichols better get right out to the ranch. The cook can fix yuh up when you get there. Luke, yuh better git goin'—"

"What yuh aimin' to do, Drake?" Nichols asked, as he rounded the tierail and got into the saddle of his own horse.

"I figger to stay in town a spell and 'tend to some business."

Nichols nodded and turned his pony.

"C'mon," he growled to Peters, "give that crowbait of yore'n a mite of spur. We got work to do and we ain't got all day to do it."

Meekly, Peters complied with the order. The two horses loped side by side. Gradually the town was left behind as the way led over rolling grass lands.

At the end of a half dozen miles, Nichols pulled to a much slower gait. With considerable relief, Peters followed the foreman's example.

"I was wonderin' how long yuh expected to keep that up," Peters panted.

Nichols' eyes showed thinly-veiled contempt.

"I always do that first six miles in jig time. Now we only got a coupla more to do. We ain't got no time for loafin' on the DH. I got work planned out for you, Peters."

Pokealong said in some alarm. "Don't I get no dinner first?"

"Cripes! I'll see that you git time for some chow."

"I shore hope the DH has got a good cook."

"Feller, that's where yuh're in luck!" For the first time Nichols showed enthusiasm. "The DH has got the finest cookie on any man's range. We ain't had him long. Less'n two months. Feller name of Spud Callahan. He blew into the Fargo Bar one night and took a load of red likker aboard. That made him plumb talkative—"

"Uh-huh, it does that to some fellers—"

"Well, it was pay night and the whole DH crew was on hand, our regular cook included. Well, this Callahan allows as how he's the best cook on seven ranges. Our regular cookie takes exception to the remark. One thing leads to another and th' first thing we know, Callahan floors the cook. With his fists, by yeepers.

And our cook was a big bruiser with a rep for fightin', but couldn't boil water without scorchin' it. So this little ol' Callahan hands out as pretty a lacin' as you ever heard on. The upshot of the matter was, our regular cook wa'n't able to work for a week. Hannan fired him and hired Callahan."

"How many in the crew?" Peters asked.

"Me'n Drake run the outfit. Then there's Callahan; and Crowley and Uhlmann that you saw yesterday."

As they mounted a sloping rise, Nichols gestured toward the Turbio Range. "There's Benton's spread. Over that way, right in the shadow of them mountains. It's jest about twelve mile in a southwesterly direction from the DH. C'mon, Peters, don't fall asleep in yore rig. Snap it up, we ain't got much farther."

Again the two horses leaped into swift motion. Before long, topping a second rise of ground, Pokealong saw the cluster of frame shacks that comprised the DH ranch buildings.

"Looks sort of deserted," Pokealong yawned. "Where's everybody?"

"Spud Callahan is pro'bly in his kitchen. With Porter wounded and Crampton dead, that only leaves Crowley and Uhlmann. They're out ridin' range some place."

"And me—don't forget me," Peters reminded him.

"You got to be reminded of yoreself?" Nichols grinned. "Don't take yore rig off. We'll be ridin' in a spell."

Nichols led the way to the cook shanty. They were nearly to the door when a little, bald-headed man with a stringy mustache and a button-like nose appeared in the doorway. His black eyes surveyed Peters and Nichols coldly.

"Now, what?" he demanded querulously. "I suppose you expect me to warm up chow an' you comin' late for dinner again."

"We'd sort of like it," Nichols said placatingly. "Spud, shake hands with Peters. He's just hired on with the DH."

Peters put out one hand. Callahan surveyed it with bleak eyes and made no effort to shake hands. "Humpf!" he grunted grouchily, "One more hungry mouth to feed. Well, it's askin' a good deal but you cow-nurses hold yore hosses and I'll get chow."

Chow, when it was ready, consisted of beans, fried potatoes, greasy bacon and lukewarm coffee. At the end of the meal came something that might have resembled dried apple pie. Nichols sat back and heaved a long sigh:

"There, ain't that real food?" he asked Peters.

"I don't know when I ate a meal just like it," Pokealong yawned.

The cook, hanging on his words, frowned suspiciously.

"Anybody as don't like my chow, can say it outright like a man—and fight me."

"C'mon, Peters," Nichols said hastily. "We got work to do."

Pokealong followed Nichols to the barn where he was given a long-handled spade.

Nichols crossed to the watering trough and rested the spade against it.

"Wait here, Peters. I got to go in the bunkhouse a few minutes to check into some of my accounts. Yuh might take them saddles off and rub down th' broncs a mite. And don't fall asleep on the job. I'll call yuh when I want yuh."

HE strode away, entered the bunkhouse and slammed the door.

Peters stood near the watering trough, undecided for a moment. He glanced toward the cook shanty to see Spud Callahan eyeing him from the doorway. Deliberately, Pokealong turned to his pony, loosened the cinch and started to strip off the saddle.

Peters removed the saddle blanket, rubbed the pony's back with the other side of the blanket a few moments, then abruptly dropped it to earth and started toward the bunkhouse. He circled wide, coming around to the back of the building. Here were two dust-covered windows.

Pokealong took a long chance, rubbed the dust from one of the windows and peered inside. For a moment he couldn't see much of anything except some bunks, a table, chairs. Then, in one corner, he caught sight of Nichols kneeling before a square opening in the floor.

One arm disappeared in the opening and tugged at a small, stoutly built box reinforced at the corners with metal. Inside the box was a heavily-weighted burlap sack which Nichols lifted and dropped through the opening in the floor.

Pokealong didn't dare wait to see more. He moved back to the horses at the trough, resaddled his own mount. The cook was nowhere in sight. A moment later the bunkhouse door opened and Nichols called:

"Peters, come in here a minute."

Pokealong stepped to the bunkhouse door, pushed it farther open and entered. Then, the door banged suddenly shut and something round and hard was jabbed into Pokealong's back.

"Up with 'em, Peters," Nichols snapped. "Reach high!"

"Hey, Mister Nichols!" Pokealong started to turn.

"Don't move or I'll blast you to hell!" Nichols' tones were savage. "Reach high, damn you!"

Lazily, Pokealong stretched his arms in the air.

CHAPTER VII

The Ophir Payroll

NICHOLS grunted satisfaction.

"There. That's better. Now yuh needn't get scared. I jest ain't takin' chances. Yuh may be a sleepy no-good pack-mule like Hannan says, but I ain't riskin' it. Yuh see, Peters, I can't forget that reward bill concernin' yuh—"

"Did Mr. Hannan tell yuh about that?" Pokealong sounded disappointed.

"He shore did. I ain't aimin' to harm you, less'n you start actin' up. Lower yore hands gentle and unbuckle yore gun belt. Make one bad move and you get a chunk of hot lead through yore spine. I ain't in no mood to fool. Git busy!"

Peters unbuckled his belt, the holstered gun dropped to the floor. Following further orders, Pokealong stepped several paces away, while Nichols kicked the gun and belt into a far corner.

The DH foreman grinned nastily.

"Yuh're doin' fine, Peters. Now"—gesturing with the six-shooter held in one brawny hand "—pick up that box over there and we'll be leavin'."

It was the box Pokealong had seen Nichols drag up through the opening in the floor. But there was no opening in sight now. A couple of feet from the box a soiled Indian rug was spread on the floor. Pokealong suspected that a trap door was concealed beneath the rug.

"But look here, Mr. Nichols, I don't understand what—"

Nichols tilted his gun meaningly.

"No need for yuh to understand. Do as I say and yuh won't be hurt. Pick up that box."

Pokealong obeyed. Judging from its weight, the box was empty. A bullet-smashed lock still dangled from its fastenings on one side. Nichols abruptly kicked open the bunkhouse door.

"Git outside," he said sharply. A moment later he followed Peters through the door, his six-shooter still bearing on Peters' back.

In the open air, Pokealong affected surprise.

"This looks like the sort of a strong box that express companies or stages carry. Sure, here's the name of a stage coach company painted on the cover—"

"Peters, put down that box *pronto!*" Nichols sounded ugly. "Yuh want to know too much. I'll carry the box. Go on, drop it. Then, git over there and pick up that spade. Yuh can

carry that. Git on yore hoss and we'll git ridin'."

He waited until Peters had dropped the box and moved several paces away to procure the spade, then Nichols reached down and seized the strap handle on one end.

"Git on yore nag," he ordered.

"But what we goin' to do?"

Nichols cursed in exasperation.

"All right, I'll tell yuh, if that will make yuh move any faster. We're goin' to ride over on Benton's Spur holdin's—some place near the house—and bury this box—"

"By gosh," Pokealong said indignantly, "that don't seem hardly fair. Yuh're figurin' to have this box dug up and used as evidence against Benton. Is this Mr. Hannan's orders?"

For a moment, Nichols didn't reply. His face clouded like a thunderstorm. Pokealong stood waiting, holding the spade in one hand while his heavy-lidded gaze surveyed the DH foreman. Nichols spoke at last, his tones ugly.

"Yes, them's Hannan's orders, but mebbe I'll change 'em a mite. Peters, yuh're too damn inquisitive. Come on now, git on yore hoss. I'll bring this box."

"I don't like the idea of yuh changin' Mr. Hannan's orders. Yuh give me a new idea."

"What do yuh mean?" Nichols rasped.

"I bet yuh're figurin' to take me over to the Spur. Then when I've dug a hole for this box, yuh'll shoot me and claim yuh found me buryin' it. With that reward bill against me—"

"Cripes 'mighty! Have yuh gone crazy?"

"I ain't a-goin'," Pokealong stated defiantly.

Nichols tilted the six-shooter.

"By Harry, yuh'll do as I say or—"

His gun roared even as Pokealong leaped to one side, whirling the spade as he moved. The heavy implement shot from Pokealong's hand like an arrow from a bow, as Nichols pulled trigger a second time.

The sharp edge of the heavy spade struck Nichols squarely on the forehead and he went down like a poled ox, the six-gun flying from his grasp. Both his shots had missed.

At the same moment, Spud Callahan darted from the cook-shanty, carrying a Winchester rifle.

"Pokey, yuh long-legged, sleepy-eyed devil, what yuh up to now?" Callahan's face was white. "I was watchin' from the window. Boy, yuh shouldn't take chances like that."

Pokealong smiled lazily, as he stooped over Nichols' unconscious form and plucked the silver and turquoise ring from the man's red neckerchief.

"WHAT I want to know is," he chuckled, "how did this outfit ever get an idea *you* could cook?"

Callahan grinned sheepishly.

"Darned if I know. Their last cook must have been terrible. Yuh sure laid Luke Nichols out cold. By gosh!" he exclaimed, catching sight of the strong box. "There's the Golden Ophir box!"

"I think I know where the money is too. You learn anythin', Spud?"

"Nothin' much I could tie to. Words dropped here and there, o' course. Then, one night Hannan mailed a turquoise-set bracelet to some fancy lady in the next county. I saw him wrappin' it up. Next, Crowley and Nichols commenced sportin' rings—like that one yuh just took off—but I didn't have nothin' certain to go on. I was shore glad to see yuh when yuh showed up today. I thought yuh never was going to get here. What detained yuh?"

"Got mixed up in a fight in Turbio Tanks yesterday," Peters explained, sketching in the details.

"Well, I'll be damned. Things are gittin' hot."

"Dang right. We got to move fast, Spud. Catch hold this coyote's feet. We'll take him into the bunkhouse. I'll bet he won't stir for an hour."

"That's a dang nasty cut on his forehead."

"Let him bleed. Mebbe it'll tame

him down some. He's a skunk."

Nichols, still out, was carried in and deposited on a bunk. Pokealong retrieved his belt and gun from the corner, put them on, then went to the opposite corner and kicked aside the Indian rug. Beneath the rug, a small door fitted snugly into the floor. Peters flung it open, reached down inside.

Five minutes later, the contents of a burlap sack had been spilled on the floor: a small heap of gold coins, silver money and bills; a quantity of silver Navajo jewelry, several letters that had already been opened.

"There's the Golden Ophir payroll," Pokealong said grimly. "Yuh shore had the right hunch, Spud. They probably opened those letters to see if any of 'em held money."

Callahan laughed harshly.

"Now I know why the outfit never seemed very friendly when I come in here. They was afraid I might discover somethin'."

Pokealong rose to his feet.

"Better put this cash back where it was. Get that strong box outside to put it into. But first, yuh better git some rope and tie Nichols up fast. Then stay right here, in case Hannan or the others show up. Keep yore gun handy and don't let 'em in."

"But what *you* aimin'—"

"I got some other business first."

"Why can't we just take this stuff and head for—"

"Listen, Spud, that'll wait. This Benton *hombre* is a pretty good fellow. I'd like to git him straightened out before we leave. Crowley and Uhlmann are at the Spur right now. I aim to git over there."

"Shore, shore, I'd forgot him for the minute. I was so dang glad to find this money—"

"Yuh'n me both. But do as I say. I won't be gone long. Just hold the fort until I come back—and see that Nichols don't get loose."

"Not a chance," Callahan laughed grimly.

Gone was all trace of Pokealong's indolent movements now. He darted through the door, vaulted into his saddle, turned the pony and flashed off in the direction of the Spur outfit.

CHAPTER VIII

Pokealong Makes His Play

MILE after mile slipped past under the drumming hoofs of the little pony. Hills and brush were a blur of green and grey. Flecks of foam whisked back on the horse's withers. Its hide was streaked with sweat. But not for one instant did the pony falter in its rhythmic stride.

"Good hoss, good hoss," Pokealong muttered, patting the pony's neck. He rode high in the stirrups, easing his weight as much as possible. "C'mon, eat up them miles. Yuh done ten miles in forty minutes onct. This time we got about twelve. Lay to it, hoss!"

They were climbing gradually through the foothills of the Turbios. Each rise of land was a little higher than the last one. Minutes clipped by swiftly.

At last, topping a low, rock-spined ridge, Pokealong dipped down a long slope that ended where a small cluster of buildings nestled in a cottonwood grove. Here and there he passed white-faced heifers, branded with the Spur iron. Brush grew high at one side of the buildings and here, slowing pace, Pokealong brought his panting pony to a halt. Then he went cautiously on foot toward the square adobe ranchhouse he had seen through the cottonwoods.

Three horses were tied before the gallery that fronted the house, and loud voices reached Pokealong's ears through the open front door. Pokealong paused a moment, hitched his gun nearer the front, and listened. Crowley's and Uhlmann's voices.

Hannan's, too. And suddenly, a girl's scream.

Pokealong's face burned. He took quick noiseless steps toward the open door, peered around the edge of the jamb.

Standing near the door, their backs to Peters, were Uhlmann and Hannan. Struggling in the center of the room were Crowley and a girl.

"Damn if I like this, chief," Uhlmann was saying. "Yuh're always warnin' us about gettin' rough and now you order Crowley—"

"T'hell with that," Hannan cried. "I'm at the end of my patience. We got too much at stake to be stopped by a gal."

Crowley growled at Uhlmann.

"Git out if yo're too squeamish, Uhlmann. Drake knows what he's doin'. We got to have that chunk of hide."

Smack!

Polly Benton twisted around and swung her fist hard against Crowley's face.

Crowley cursed. "Yuh dang' spitfire." He grabbed at her shoulder, seized one wrist. "Yuh goin' to tell us where that piece of cowhide is hid—"

"NO!" the girl cried defiantly. You'll suffer for this—you—"

"Give her arm another twist, Hump," Hannan said coldly to Crowley. "After goin' this far, we can't stop."

"Right, boss," Crowley grunted. His breath was coming in short quick jerks. He puffed and panted, the girl trying to fight him off. His face was criss-crossed with scratches.

"I reckon that's enough," Pokealong said grimly. He hadn't drawn his gun, but stood idly in the door frame, lounging against the jamb, right thumb hooked in cartridge belt.

Crowley glanced up, open-mouthed. Polly Benton broke loose from his grasp. Hannan and Uhlmann whirled, hands dropping to gun-butts.

"Aw, it's only that sleepy-eyed fool," Crowley growled.

Hannan and Uhlmann relaxed.

"What you doin' here? Where's Luke Nichols?" Hannan demanded.

Pokealong was thinking fast. Three against one. The odds were pretty big.

"Who?" he drawled. "Oh, sure, Nichols. He sent me over here to see what Uhlmann and Crowley were doing."

"Why didn't he come?"

"He met up with an accident of some sort. Bumped his head on a spade or somethin'. Spud Callahan was takin' care of him when I left."

"Clumsy fool!" Hannan growled.

"Uh-huh, Nichols must have got careless or—"

"I ain't talkin' about Nichols," Hannan snapped.

"Me, eh?" Pokealong grinned sheepishly. "How come you ain't in town, boss?"

"I come out here to find a skinned-out brand. I know it's here and I'm goin' to have it—"

"Looks like Crowley's face was skinned out, if that's what yuh mean," Pokealong snickered. "He's shore tuckered. And fightin' a gal too. Yuh know I don't rightly hold with that sort of—"

"Think yuh could do any better?" Crowley snarled. He made a grab for Polly, who eluded him and darted to the far corner of the room. Her eyes were on Pokealong, wondering whether he were friend or foe.

"No, I couldn't do that a-tall," Pokealong stated flatly. "It takes a lowdown skunk to do what yuh been doin', Crowley."

Crowley yelled with rage, swung around to face Pokealong.

"Now, look here, all of yuh, I don't want no fightin'—" Hannan commenced.

"Crowley don't know how to fight," Pokealong sneered.

"If yuh're lookin' for trouble—" Crowley's hand started toward his gun.

"What do *you* think?" Pokealong said insolently. His hand abruptly dropped to his side.

Crowley jerked his gun free from the holster, pulled the trigger. The

gun barked savagely, but Pokealong had already swung himself half across the room. He whirled in the air, catlike, coming down on his toes and drawing and firing at the same instant.

Crowley coughed and clawed at his middle. Then, stumbling and retching, he staggered through the doorway where he crashed down across the gallery.

Like a flash, Pokealong reholstered his gun. Hannan's and Uhlmann's guns were already out, covering Pokealong who raised his arms slowly in the air.

"Look here, Mr. Hannan," he said nervously, "yuh can't blame me for this. He pulled first. Yuh saw that. There wa'n't nothin' else for me to do. I don't hold with fightin' women and I said so, but I didn't start no gun trouble. He had first shot—"

"That's right, chief." Uhlmann lowered his gun.

"I dunno." Hannan appeared uncertain. "I reckon yuh're right. Still and all I didn't figger yuh could move that fast. For two cents I'd blast you, anyhow. Crowley was a good man—"

"Look here, Mr. Hannan," Pokealong said eagerly, "you said somethin' about lookin' for a skinned-out brand."

"Yeah, what about it?" Hannan's manner changed, his gun muzzle dropped. "Yuh know anythin' about it?"

"Certain I do. Benton told me. It's in this gal's room, under a carpet. Look under her dresser."

"Oh, you beast!" Polly cried. "You traitor. If Matt told you that, he trusted you. Oh, I could—" She broke off, started toward Peters, then stopped, white-faced and dropped into a chair.

Hannan gave a whoop of delight. "We've looked high and low and never thought of the carpet in that room."

Turning, he dashed through the door leading from the main room of the house and started for the rear of the building.

Like a flash, Pokealong whirled toward Uhlmann, drawing his gun as he moved. Uhlmann raised his weapon, staggered back.

"Drake! Help, Drake!" he half-screamed. "This *hombre* is—"

The next instant, Pokealong had swung the heavy barrel of the .45 against Uhlmann's head. The man went down, cursing, not quite out, his hands clutching at Pokealong's body. Pokealong tried to jerk free, but Uhlmann held on like grim death, his fingers clawing to get Pokealong's six-shooter.

Behind him, Pokealong heard Hannan's running footsteps.

CHAPTER IX

Gun Finish

EVEN as Hannan entered the room, Uhlmann had succeeded in pulling Pokealong to the floor. For an instant, the two rolled over and over, Pokealong fighting to get his gun arm free of those gripping, sinewy hands.

"Hold him, Nick, hold him!" Hannan yelled.

A bullet ripped into the wall a few inches from Pokealong's head. Pokealong suddenly relaxed, dropped down. Uhlmann's grip eased. Pokealong jerked free, rolled swiftly to one side, as Hannan fired a second shot. But Polly spoiled Hannan's aim. Just as Hannan raised his gun, the girl rushed forward and knocked up his arm.

Hannan cursed and gave the girl a shove that sent her flying across the room. Again he raised his gun. Snarling like a wildcat, Uhlmann came scrambling after Pokealong, threw himself on Pokealong just as Hannan fired. A cry of agony left his wide-open mouth and he fell to one side.

Pokealong laughed grimly. "Shot

yore own man, Hannan. Catch this one."

The gun in his fist jerked savagely, roared. Hannan was spun half around by the impact of the leaden slug. The gun dropped from his nerveless fingers, his arm dangled limply at his side.

Pokealong rose to his feet, kicked Hannan's guns across the room toward the girl and shoved Hannan into a chair where the man relaxed, groaning with pain.

"Watch him," Pokealong said to Polly. "If he moves, shoot to kill."

"I—I'll do that—and I'm sorry I called you—called you—"

"Forget it, Miss Benton," Pokealong smiled shortly. He dropped down beside Uhlmann's body. The man was dying fast. Pokealong spoke swift words.

Hoofbeats drummed down the slope approaching the ranchhouse. Horses stopped outside. Then, Sheriff Gage's voice roared out.

"Great jumpin' Jehosaphat! What's been goin' on here! It's Hump Crowley—nearly done for—"

"Polly! Are you all right? Polly!" Matt Benton cried in agonized tones.

"Here I am, Matt!"

Benton came rushing into the room, his face white, and clasped his sister in his arms while she stammered out details of recent happenings. Pokealong rose from Uhlmann's side. Benton was reaching for his hand, trying to speak his thanks.

Sheriff Gage stood open-mouthed in the center of the room asking questions that nobody answered.

"Will yuh *please* explain all this, Peters?" he yelled.

Pokealong turned, smiling lazily.

"I reckon. First, the gang that's been stealin' Matt's cows is broken up. Matt will give yuh real proof of that in a few minutes. It's under the carpet. Matt, Uhlmann just told me it was Crowley shot yore Mex puncher a week ago—"

"Under what carpet?" Gage asked plaintively.

"Yuh'll learn later," Pokealong said. "What's more important—here's the bandits that held up the stage carrying the Golden Ophir Mine payroll and killed the driver. Nick Uhlmann has just confessed the whole thing to me. He's dead. I don't know how bad Crowley is hurt, but Hannan is due for the hangman's noose. So is Luke Nichols. They're all involved in it."

"MY jumpin' Jehosaphat! How'd yuh learn all this—"

"Yuh see," Pokealong continued, "I was sort of interested in gettin' the skunks that pulled that holdup. Aside from the money, there was a small shipment of Indian jewelry being shipped from the Navajo Reservation. That, with the mail, makes it a government matter sort of—"

"You a Secret Service man?" Benton asked quickly.

Pokealong shook his head.

"My pardner, Spud Callahan, is, though. I've done some work for the Redmondton Detective Agency once or twice. We got together on this business. Spud is a little old codger, but there ain't nothin' he don't know about readin' signs and followin' a trail. It was thought that three men pulled the holdup, but there were more—the whole DH gang I reckon. Spud trailed 'em to Turbio Tanks, then lost the trail. Finally, from talk that was dropped in the Fargo Bar, he commenced to think the DH was back of the holdup—"

"It's all a pack of lies!" Drake Hannan shrieked. "Don't you believe him—" The man's face was ashen, his lips livid.

"Anyway," Pokealong went on, "Spud got a job cookin' for the DH and kept his ears open. Finally some of the Navajo jewelry commenced to appear. Then he sent for me. Spud's waitin' for me at the DH. We got the strong box, the money—just about everythin.' Mebbe by this time Nichols has confessed. Spud can be powerful persuasive, sometimes. And Nichols can't help himself. And now I better be gettin' along to see Spud and tell him—"

"Don't let him leave, Sheriff!" Han-

nan staggered up from the chair, right arm dangling at his side. "It's all a lie. Peters is tryin' to get away and take that gold for himself. Hang on to him. There's a reward on his head for robbin' a bank."

Pokealong grinned sleepily while Hannan clawed at one pocket and produced the folded reward bill which he handed to Sheriff Gage. Gage unfolded it slowly and commenced to read. Suddenly he stiffened.

"BY cripes! Peters, this don't sound good."

"I'm plumb disappointed," Pokealong grinned, "seein' as I wrote it myself and had it printed, then sent it to yuh. Yuh see, outlaws keep track of such things. I figgered it might git me in with the gang. Somehow yuh didn't notice it, but Hannan did and fell hard for the idea."

Matt Benton laughed. Polly was smiling now. Hannan had collapsed on his chair with a groan of defeat.

"By gosh," Sheriff Gage said to Benton, "it's a good thing yuh decided to come in and give yoreself up. We jest arrived in time. I'd like to see that rustlin' proof you spoke of."

"We'll git to that later," Benton answered. "I was jest goin' to suggest, Sam, that you and me take Hannan, Uhlmann and Crowley to town. We can go to the DH and pick up Nichols and tell Callahan what's happened. Knowin' Pokey like I do, I imagine he's about ripe to do some restin'. 'Sides, I'd like to have him git acquainted with Polly."

Polly looked at Pokealong. Pokealong looked at Polly. Certain unspoken phrases in the girl's eyes decided things for Pokealong.

"I shore think that's an elegant idea," he grinned lazily. "It's restful here—now—and I figger to be plumb comfortable."

The sheriff was still scrutinizing the reward bill. "Hey," he asked Pokealong suddenly, "is yore name really *Percival Edmund?*"

Pokealong shook his head, grinning.

"Nope, I jest wrote those names in because I liked the initials. They're so plumb descriptive."

"Initials?" Gage said blankly.

Benton chuckled.

"P. E. P. That spells 'pep' in my lingo."

Gage glared at Pokealong, snorted derisively.

"Huh! Pep. Of all things! Pep!" He stopped suddenly, then added: "I dunno though. There might be somethin' in it."

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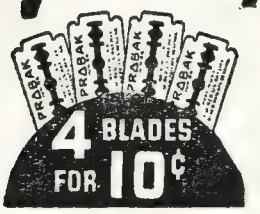

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PROBAK JUNIOR

Sour Dough

"Stick 'em up, boys, an' no monkey business!"

A Gold-Thieving Skunk Stakes All His Chips on a Getaway—and Comes Home in a Barrel!

By CHARLES D. RICHARDSON, JR.

Author of "Stage Profits," "Devil's Holdup," etc.

BEANPOLE BILLY WETZEL slouched over the counter of the Puma City Grocery, and munched on a soda cracker covered with jam. His sharp-pointed Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed.

"'Tain't safe, Pipsqueak, keepin' that gold here. Not with Skin Dugan roamin' 'round loose," he argued between gulps.

On the counter beside him perched Pipsqueak Pendergrast. A blue haze drifted lazily upward from the smelly corncob between his teeth.

Pipsqueak was a little less than a half-pint, had a shiny, bald head fringed with red hair tufts. He looked for all the world like an overgrown kewpie doll.

But he was sole owner of the Puma City Grocery, and Beanpole Billy had worked for him for years.

Pipsqueak withdrew the corncob, sniffed. "Daggone it, Beanpole," he piped, "ever since my brother Hal died an' left me all his gold dust, yuh ain't give me a minute's peace. Yuh bin wet-nursin' me like all get-out. Don't be sech a durn wet blanket, Beanpole. Skin Dugan ain't gonna get none o' my dust."

Beanpole shook his head. Cracker

crumbs sprayed when he talked.

"Jest the same, yuh wanna be on the lookout. Skin's heard o' yore comin' inta dough, an' he'll be layin' fer yuh. I'll bet, by gosh—"

"Aw, dry up." Pipsqueak slid from the counter. "Sheriff Belter er some o' his men're allus 'round near here. If I smells trouble, all I gotta do is whistle twice, an' they'll come a-runnin'. Belter an' me agreed on that. Come on, Beanpole, we'd best go out an' bring in that barrel Hank Debbs hauled in from the station."

The lanky Beanpole raised his spindly leg for a spring over the counter, Pipsqueak wisely making for the swinging gate at the far end. Each had just about completed his actions when someone carrying a sack of potatoes barged through the front door.

"Hell," grunted Beanpole, rolling back over the counter, "'nother dissatisfied customer, I'll bet."

The man's Stetson peeked over the sack he carried. Twin sixes swung at his hips. His spurs clanked when he walked.

Pipsqueak Pendergrast waddled up behind the counter.

"Howdy, mister, what kin I do fer yuh?" he asked curiously.

A deep voice mumbled something unintelligible from behind the potato sack. Suddenly, the sack dropped with a thud to the floor. Pipsqueak and Beanpole found themselves staring into the muzzles of the twin sixes.

"Stick 'em up, boys, an' no monkey business!" came the sharp command. The two obeyed quickly.

Over the .45s peered the hardest face they had seen in a long time.

"Skin Dugan!" snorted Beanpole and Pipsqueak together.

Skin Dugan grinned coldly. "Kinda slipped one over on yuh, huh, Pendergrast?" he purred. "I thought that customer gag would work. Gived me a chanct to get in hyar an' cover yuh 'fore yuh could get word to thet damn sheriff."

His eyes glinted determinedly.

"Yuh know what I'm here fer. C'mon, Pendergrast, ante up them gold-bags yer brother Hal left. Shake a leg. I don't want nobuddy comin' in here an' crabbin' my act."

Pipsqueak's little red face wrinkled up in anger.

"Dang yore pictures, Skin Dugan," he shrilled. "Throw away them irons an' I'll give yuh the worst lickin' yuh ever seen. I ain't spent ten years on the range punchin' cows fer nothin'. I'll bust that buzzard neck o' yore'n like a pipestem. By gosh, you can't make me give up ol' Hal's gold. I'm on easy street now, Dugan, an' I'll be daggone if I'll lose all my dough to a polecat like you."

Skin Dugan thrust his hatchet face across the counter. "Yuh'll come acrost with them bags an' like it. One more squawk outa yuh an' I'll make yuh look like a sieve. Get 'em out, now!"

White-faced and shaking, Beanpole Billy kicked the little grocer on the leg.

"Fer God's sake, Pipesqueak," he rattled, "do like Skin says. He'll slug yuh shore if yuh crosses him."

Muttering under his breath, Pipsqueak Pendergrast moved along the crowded shelves until he came to a row of coffee cans. He stretched up, barely touched one of the cans with his stubby fingers. Pipsqueak swiped it off the shelf.

REMOVING the lid, he drew out three buckskin bags, toted them over to the counter.

"There yuh are, blast yuh," he grated, and dumped them before the lean outlaw. "An' I hopes yuh rots 'fore yuh gits to use 'em."

Skin Dugan holstered one of his .45s, snatched greedily at the bags with his left hand. He poked them into his pockets.

"That's all fer today, gents," he chuckled. He moved slowly backward toward the door. "All I gotta do now is t' ride slow-like outa Puma City, then beat it like hell fer my hideout. I ain't liable t' be stopped in these clothes. They're from a feller I gunned a couple years ago. I allus uses 'em if I'm

goin' a place I'm likely to be spotted in. So long, gents. Give yore dumb sheriff my—"

Beanpole Billy's long arm had flashed behind the counter, whipped up in front of Skin Dugan. A heavy six-gun boomed from the skinny hand. "Take that, yuh ornery skunk!" shrieked Beanpole.

Skin Dugan didn't bat an eyelash. As the slug from Beanpole's gun slashed at his shirt-sleeve, he pumped his own trigger three times at the lanky clerk.

Beanpole Billy spun like a top, crashed against the shelves behind. Tomato cans, pickle jars, and cracker boxes tumbled all over him.

"That's what yuh'll get an' more," barked Skin Dugan to the stiffened figure of Pipsqueak. "I gotta git outa here, an' quick. Them shots'll bring the sheriff, shore as shootin'."

He glanced quickly about the room, squinted at the little door at the rear.

"I figgered somethin' like this might happen. I'll duck out the back way. So long, stupid."

He wheeled and ran to the back door. It was locked, but Skin didn't take time to monkey with the mechanism. He stepped back a pace, and crashed forward with all his might. He went through the door as if it were paper.

At the same instant, several men jammed through the front door. A heavy-set man hurried over to Pipsqueak stooping by the limp form of Beanpole Billy. Pipsqueak had dragged his lengthy pal out to the middle of the room, was dabbing at a gaping wound with his polkadot handkerchief.

The heavy-set man shook Pipsqueak roughly. "Is he dead, Pipsqueak? Who done thet shootin'?" he bawled into the little grocer's ear.

Pipsqueak turned in a sort of haze. "I—I think he's slugged purty bad, Sheriff. Lord, I don't know what I'd do without Beanpole. I'd miss his fussin' like the devil."

Suddenly his expression changed. Hate glowed in his brown eyes.

"Skin Dugan done it, the dirty skunk! Slugged Beanpole an' took my dust. Quick, Belter, out the back way! He jest left a second ago."

"Skin Dugan!" Sheriff Belter smote his hip a resounding smack. "I might knowed that coyote'd pull a fast one. Lissen," he turned to his men, "Bob an' Luke an' Spud stay here with Pipsqueak. Harry, yuh an' Sniggers beat it out the front. The rest o' yuh foller me."

Belter and four of his posse poured out the back door. The sheriff let his eyes roam over the open prairie before him.

"Not a speck in sight. 'Round to the front, quick!"

The five of them tore around the rain barrel, between the grocery and harness shop, zipped about the front corner.

There, they ran smack into Harry and Sniggers hot-footing it toward the rear. They all started jabbering at once.

Sheriff Belter let out a bellow. "Shet up! Dang it, we ain't gettin' no place. Sniggers, yuh seen anything of Dugan?"

The big puncher shook his head.

"Ain't been 'round here, Belter. But there's his hoss. He can't git far, whoever he is."

BELTER tipped back his black Stetson, scratched his coarse hair.

"He's hidin' somewheres, waitin' fer night. Getaway's twice as easy then. We gotta find him 'fore then. But where in th'—"

Just then, Pipsqueak Pendergrast stepped out the door. He stumbled down the steps, came over to the sheriff. He clutched a .45 in his pudgy right hand.

"I sent fer the doc," he said, soft and low. "He's in there now, workin' on pore ol' Beanpole. Says he's got a fair chance t' pull through." His words cut sharper. "Ain't got Skin yet, huh? Well, it's jest gonna be too bad fer that snake when I spots 'im."

Belter shrugged. "Me an' the boys been 'round yore store. An' he ain't inside. Beats all, how he coulda dis-

appeared so all-fired sudden. Tell yuh what, les' go back to the other door. That's where yuh seen him last. Mebbe we kin pick up a clue er somethin'."

He spun about, retraced his steps to the rear. Pipsqueak and the other four followed closely. When they reached the back steps, Belter crouched in the dust.

"Hmmm. Tracks too dang muddled to figger out much," he muttered. "Looks like we're up a tree all right."

They were all squinting into the sandy ground, when there was a sudden loud splashing behind them. Something choked and sputtered, let out a roar like a locoed bull.

The six of them whirled, stared at the corner of the grocery. From the large rain barrel rose a weird object. A limp, dripping Stetson sagged about its glistening head. In its left hand it clutched an oil-skin bag.

IT was Skin Dugan, soaked completely and resembling a wet dish-rag.

Still choking and sputtering, Skin pawed into the bag, flipped out a six-gun. He trained it on Pipsqueak Pendergrast.

"Yuh—daggone yuh, Pendergrast, you done this!"

His gun flamed, belched smoke, but the bullet sped harmlessly past Pipsqueak's left ear.

Pipsqueak, seeing his chance, threw up his own .45 and yanked the trigger.

Skin Dugan jerked up his hands, doubled up over the rim of the rain barrel. A stream of blood slithered from a hole above his right eye.

Sheriff Belter rushed up. He dragged the sodden figure from the churning liquid.

He dumped it unceremoniously to the ground.

"Pipsqueak, what th' devil? Yuh mean t' tell me that jasper's been in there all the time we was sweatin' 'round lookin' fer him?"

Pipsqueak grinned faintly.

"I don't know nothin' 'bout how long Skin was in there, but there's one thing I do know. That ain't rain in thet barrel. Take a taste, Belter, an' see what yuh think."

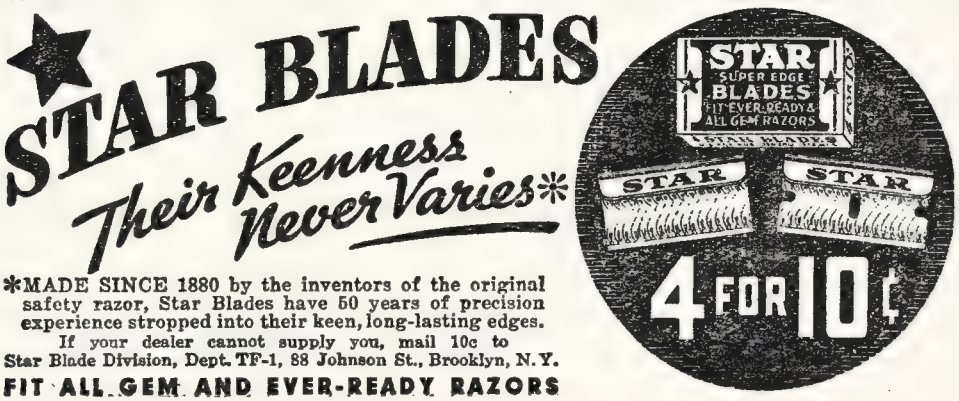
Sheriff Belter cupped up a handful of the liquid, spat it out promptly.

"Vinegar!" he choked.

"Shore," agreed Pipsqueak. "With all that stuff smartin' his nose an' eyes, Skin couldn't stay in another minute, let alone shoot straight. Y' see, Skin had it all planned out. He musta figgered on hidin' in the rain barrel, if he was run too close. He could stick his head out fer air now an' then. An' he had his guns in a waterproof bag. But—"

He chuckled again.

"Skin didn't know I got the vinegar barrel in from the station jest a little while 'fore he come. The lid was smashed off. Skin thought it was a rain barrel, bein' right by the spout thataway. The real rain barrel, I was fixin' fer leaks. An' that reminds me"—he made a wry face—"them gold bags're gonna smell like heck fer God knows how long, daggone it!"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GUNS in

"I weel take, senor, that wheech you hold"

CHAPTER I

From Death's Hand

"HOLD it, hoss! Hold it!" Ken Bolton tightened his hold on the reins and gripped his plunging horse's sides with muscular thighs. His right hand streaked to the heavy Colt sagging low in its cut-out holster. There was a dull flash of metal, a sullen roar. The up-reared head of the rattler that had startled the cayuse vanished like a cowpoke's roll on payday. Ken ejected the spent shell and slid in a fresh cartridge, staring at the headless body in mild surprise.

"Why, the durn thing had its back broke!" he exclaimed as he watched the upper portion of the snake jerk and quiver. The tail half was practically motionless. "Now ain't that funny as hell?" he wondered. "It don't seem—"

The words died on his lips and his grey eyes narrowed slightly. His bronzed right hand again hovered over the black butt of the Colt.

From a clump of sage near the

Lancing Flames Pierce the Pitch Blackness

the DARK

By A. LESLIE

Author of "Hell's Home Trail," "The Arizona Ranger," etc.

The hand holding the image swung back

trail protruded a bronzed ankle and a moccasin.

"I never seen a leg that color 'thout theah was a Injun hung onto it," Ken told himself. "What's he doin' theah under that bush and keepin' so quiet? Stay wheah yuh are a minute, hoss."

He dismounted with lithe grace and glided toward the bush, right hand still hovering over that black gun butt.

Abruptly his hand dropped away. One glance at the hideously swollen leg told him why the dark form lay so motionless and why the slain rattler had acted so queerly: the snake had bitten the Indian and a stamp of the moccasined foot had broken its back.

The Indian was not dead, but very nearly so. His body was so lean that the bones seemed on the point of bursting through the leathery skin. Ken could see that he was very old.

"Damn neah starved to death," decided the tall cowboy. "Too weak to stand it when the sidewinder fanged him. Jest had strength

as Ken Bolton Defies a Bandit Crew!

'nough left to stamp its back; then he keeled over."

As Ken leaned over the Indian, there was a glint of black eyes between nearly closed lids.

"Anythin' I kin do?" asked Ken in Spanish.

The shrunken lips writhed out a single word:

"Agua!"

Ken's own cracked and blackened lips tightened a trifle, but he did not hesitate. He got his canteen and let the last few drops that remained in it trickle into the Indian's mouth.

The Yaqui swallowed painfully, and again. With a deep sigh he sank back. Again the beady eyes looked into Ken's.

"All you got?" The voice was but a whispery croak.

Ken nodded. "Sorry—I'll pack yuh with me till we find more."

The Indian did not seem to hear.

"You give all!" he muttered. "Mebbe so you die too!"

Ken shrugged his wide shoulders.

"Quien sabe! Who knows!"

The Indian's shrunken hand moved, slowly, painfully. It fumbled at the breast of his ragged shirt, came forth holding something. He thrust it at the cowboy. A thin thread of whisper trickled past his toothless gums:

"Me give all, too!"

Then a single death-clouded word:

"Metzli!"

AS Ken reached to grasp what was shoved in his hand, the Indian stiffened. His scrawny chest swelled, sank; a crawly rattle slithered about in his throat, and he collapsed like a scorched balloon over a heap of bones. Ken nodded farewell.

"Mebbe yuh ain't so much ahaid o' me, old-timer," he muttered, glancing up at the blazing brassy-blue sky, where a black dot was already whirling and planing. His eyes dropped to what he held in his hand, and a soundless whistle seeped between his teeth.

The thing was a tiny, dully-yellow image about three inches high by half that in thickness. A point of stone had been worked into the base and the stone showed a clean fracture.

"Been busted loose from somethin' or other an' not long ago, either," Ken reasoned. "Now, ain't that one helluva lookin' thing!"

The face of the image was a demon face surmounted by a peculiar head-dress in the form of a crescent. The eyes were the size of a fingertip and a-crawl with strange, varicolored fire.

"Opals, sho' as hell!" the cowboy muttered, "and the darn thing's gold, too, jedgin' from the heft of it. Them stones oughta be wuth consid'able money, but I'd trade the darn thing right this minute for a pint o' water!"

A sudden sharp, clicking sound brought his eyes up. He stared straight into the muzzle of a heavy gun!

Back of the gun were the glinting black eyes of a man who had ridden up silently over the desert sands. He spoke in English with a heavy Spanish accent:

"I weel take, *senor,* that wheech you hold!"

"Sho'," said Ken, "take it!"

The hand holding the image shot forward. The heavy lump of gold spun through the air and caught the Mexican squarely in the face. His gun blazed, but Ken was hurtling sideways at the same instant. The lance of flame from the cowboy's Colt seemed to center on the other's chest. He coughed queerly and toppled from the saddle.

Ken lunged to his feet, gun ready, but the Mexican was dead.

Whee-e-e! Crash!

Ken felt the wind of the bullet and heard the screech of its passing before the report reached his ears. He whirled about and saw a dozen or more men riding toward him.

"The rest o' the gang!" he growled. "Cowboy, it's time yuh was goin' places!" He scooped up the opal-eyed image and swung to the saddle. "Git goin', hoss!" he shouted. "I know yuh ain't feelin' like no two-

year-old right now, but yuh sho' gotta act like one!"

Across the desert fled the tall golden sorrel, Ken snuggling low over the glossy neck, bullets whistling past.

"We ain't pullin' away from 'em none to speak on, but we're holdin' our own," he decided, glancing over his shoulder at the hard-riding figures a quarter of a mile distant. "Hoss, I betcha me that gang was trailin' the old Injun. Musta got wind to what he had."

His grey eyes swept the desert ahead and he swore viciously:

"Hoss, we're gonna get ourselves s'rounded sho' as hell!"

Far ahead and to the right, swooping along on a slant that would cut the fugitive's trail, was another body of horsemen. Ken counted four this time.

Ken veered slightly to the left. He glanced back and saw that his pursuers had gained a trifle.

"If I cut over 'nough to miss that gang ahaid, the main outfit'll catch up with me in a hurry," he muttered. "Cuttin' to the right gives them the edge on me." He gazed longingly ahead to where loomed shadowy hills fanged with stone and slashed by canyons. "Once we make them darn *barrancas,* we're safe," he told the horse, "but we got a darn small chanct to make 'em 'fore them sidewinders settle a loop on us!"

Nearer loomed the hills, but nearer still were the four horsemen riding grimly down their long slant. Ken glanced over his shoulder for the last time and saw that the pursuing band had cut the distance almost to half. Bullets were clipping past now, so close he could feel the wind of them.

"Salivatin' sidewinders!"

Under the puncher's tightening hand on the reins, the sorrel missed a stride, floundered. Ken himself was on the verge of "floundering!"

Straight ahead, where the four horsemen were charging down a long slope, the ground abruptly fell away—fell away to a wide bench ten feet below, then plunged in a dizzy slant to the floor of a gloomy canyon that bored slantwise into the hills. To ride down that craggy, boulder-strewn slope was madness.

"It's up to you, hoss!" Ken muttered, loosening the bridle again.

But it was up to Ken first. Fifty yards from the lip of the slope, the four riders jerked their broncs to a plunging halt and their guns spat fire at the horseman thundering down upon them.

"At 'em, hoss! At 'em!"

Ken dropped the reins on the cayuse's neck, crouched low and charged the four riders, a flaming Colt in each hand. There was a thunder-roll of shots, a veritable tomcat squall of flying lead and a welter of plunging horses and yelling men. Blood waterfalled down Ken's face from where a slug ripped along his temple. Another burned his cheek and a third tore a ragged gash along the top of his shoulder. In the excitement, he hardly felt them.

DOWN went two horses, their riders cursing and screaming. A third man plunged from his saddle with a long wail. Ken rode straight at the fourth man, guns roaring. As the other's horse screamed and reared he caught a glimpse of a swarthy face with a broken nose, a cruel slit of a mouth, and a livid scar puckering from left temple to chin point.

"*El Zopilote!* The Buzzard. The hell-rarin'est bandit leader in all Sinaloa!" Ken mouthed. "Smash him, hoss!"

Then he was on the lip of the bench! The sorrel took the ten-foot straight-down jump like a jackrabbit full of frog legs. He stumbled as he hit the bench, recovered and plunged down the long slope. Teetering and weaving he went, missing boulders by inches, leaping across gulleys, soaring over jagged rock fangs. He skittered down a final hair-raising stretch sitting on his tail, and thumped the valley floor solidly with all four feet.

On the lip of the bench, far, far above, cursing men sent ineffectual

volleys kicking up the dust of the slope. *El Zopilote,* blood on his face, his flashy velvet clothes a wreck, tried to force his men over the bench with voice and quirt, but they shied away from him, protesting that their horses would not take the jump.

"Cowards! Poltroons!" raged the Buzzard. "That *gringo* rides where you dare not! *Maldito!* and he carries with him the image, and doubtless the secret of whence it came!"

CHAPTER II

Dry-gulched

KEN found water in the canyon.

"And, hoss, if we had not found it," he assured the sorrel, "come this time t'morrer, you an' me'd been lettin' down the corral bars in a place wheah the only thing they use water for is to make steam an' temper pitchforks."

Ken hadn't eaten for so long that his mouth had forgotten how to go through the motion, but the water gave him strength and courage to carry on a while longer.

He cleansed his wounds, which were slight.

"This is what comes from lopin' away from Arizona an' a good job jest 'cause I was all-time wonderin' what was on t'other side these Mexican hills," he growled. "If I ever git the chanct to settle down comf'table again, I'm gonna stay in one place so long my whiskers'll grow fast to the ground. I'm tellin' yuh, hoss, an' don't arg'fy with me!"

The sorrel's snort said plain as speech that he for one didn't believe a damn word of it.

Just as the sun sang in amber and scarlet, and a great golden star trembled above the western peaks, they came upon a town set in the mouth of the canyon.

Ken found oats and stall room for the cayuse. Then he surrounded an assortment of *frijoles, tortillas* and other Mexican dishes so hot with pepper they turned the water he had drunk into steam.

"If I stay down heah 'nother month, I won't hafta sleep under blankets all next winter," he declared. "Now, I wonder what this heah town's got to keep folks awake at night?"

The town was about as lively as a gila monster on an iceberg, but it did have a couple of dance halls and a saloon or two. Ken was just passing one of the latter when a man came out. Ken paused to stare.

There is usually nothing particularly interesting in a gentleman leaving a saloon; but when he "chooses" to come through the swinging doors head first, with arms and legs going like scared windmills, hits the ground on his left ear and turns a backward handspring to land on all fours—and land running—well, even an Arizona cowpoke will spare more then a casual glance.

Another gentleman came out almost immediately. The second man, however, came out on his feet, and Ken had a fleeting impression that he would land on his feet no matter what happened. He was tall, almost as tall as Ken's self, and broader. His eyes were frosty blue and his hair, worn long and curling, was snow white.

He glanced at the vanishing *vaquero,* made a remark or two that turned the air blue and smoking, and then, apparently forgetting all about the Mexican puncher, turned his attention to the tall American cowboy who stood eyeing him quizzically. His frosty gaze traveled swiftly over the sinewy, wide-shouldered figure and the lean, bronzed face. "What *you* doin' heah?"

The sunny light died in Ken Bolton's grey eyes and he looked the old man over coolly, but did not reply. The other instantly realized his mistake.

"Right," he nodded, "it ain't none o' my bus'ness; but I didn't mean it the way yuh figgered. What I was

hankerin' to know was, did yuh have any pertickler bus'ness down heah what would occipy all yore time?"

Ken grinned slightly; he had decided that the old timer wasn't a bad sort. "Nope," he drawled, "jest passin' through."

"Yeah? Well, I'm heah to stay, an' what I was gittin' at is I could use a *hombre* of 'bout yore build an' gen'ral appearance. C'mon in the *cantina* an' have a drink. Mebbe you an' me kin talk bus'ness.

"Anderson's my name," he continued as they sampled a bottle of golden *mescal,* "Alkali Anderson, an' I owns a ranch—the Triangle-Dot—a dozen miles west o' this dead-an'-ain't-buried *pueblo.* That was my foreman what come through the door ahaid o' me—I jest fired him."

"Do yuh allus fire 'em that way?" Ken asked with mild interest.

"When I ketch 'em hobnobbin' with wide-loopers, I do," growled Alkali Anderson. "I found out that packrat was herdin' reg'lar with some of *El Zopilote's* cow thieves; so I gives him his time, an' the toe of my boot to remember me by."

"So the Buzzard hangs cut in this deestrict," Ken commented.

"Yeah, the damned rustler! He'll make a fust-class cottonwood apple if I ever git my hands on him. Him an' his gang has been raisin' hell an' puttin' chunks under the corners on this range for the last yeah. They got their hangout southwest o' heah—in some kinda hole-in-the-wall called *Valle de la Luna."*

"Valley of the Moon. Wonder why they call it that?"

"I dunno. Chances are the old Aztec moon worshipers had a temple theah, or somethin'. Anyway, I'd sho' like to find it, an' *El Zopilote* in it. But to hell with that jigger. I wanta talk 'bout *you* a minute. Yuh look like a tophand, an' I took a shine to yuh. I got a purty good outfit o' *vaqueros* an' a couple young rannies from the States, but I needs somebody to handle them.

"Can't put a *vaquero* over the white men, an' the Arizona boys, Hank Weston and Bill Martin, ain't the right sort to run a outfit; good boys, but not built for responsibility. Losin' Hunk Davis t'night—nope, he ain't no Mexican, jest dresses like one—sorta puts me in a hole. I'm offerin' yuh a job o' foreman."

"How yuh know I ain't the same sort as Davis?"

"Son, I been readin' brands for nigh onto seventy yeahs, an' I gen'ally reads 'em right. I read Davis right the fust time I saw him, but I needed men bad right then an' took a chanct. Hunk's a damn good cowman an' I thought I could hold him straight. Gamblin's his trouble; can't leave cyahds alone and when he goes broke he'll do anythin' for money. I'll take a chanct on you."

"Well," drawled Ken, "I kin use a job right now, so I reckon I'll try it a whirl."

He fumbled for a match and his hand touched the golden image with the opal eyes.

"Any idea what *Metzli* means?" he asked Anderson.

The old man frowned a moment.

"Yeah, I rec'lect now," he said. "That's the name o' one of the old Aztec gods they usta worship in this heah heathen hangout—the moon god, I b'lieve it was."

Ken was thoughtful as he and Alkali went for their horses.

"Metzli, the moon god," he mused. *"Valle de la Luna*—Valley of the Moon. Sounds like some sort of a tieup, theah, don't it?"

MORE immediate and pressing matters soon caused Ken to forget about the queer little golden figure, however. He found the Triangle-Dot a big ranch—too big for one man to handle successfully. The *vaqueros* and the two American cowboys were good men, but they needed a strong hand to keep them in line.

Ken kept them in line, and at the same time won both their liking and respect. Old Alkali chuckled with huge satisfaction, and fervently hoped the big black-haired Arizonan would not soon again succumb to the travel itch.

Then *El Zopilote* got on the job again. Cattle began to vanish. Two haystacks were fired. A waterhole was poisoned. A *vaquero* was found dead in an outlying break he had been combing for strays. He had been shot in the back and robbed.

Cowboys and *vaqueros* swore vengeance and rode with six-guns at their belts and rifles in their saddle boots; but *El Zopilote* proved as elusive as the bird whose name he bore. Ken ordered his men to ride in pairs; but he consistently violated his own rule, despite the remonstrances of Alkali Anderson.

Ken had shown the figure to the ranch owner and told him how he got it.

"Ain't enough gold to amount to much," said Anderson, "but them opals is fine lookin' an' oughta bring quite some *pesos*. Pity yuh ain't got a few more, so's they'd match up inter a set. Then they'd be wuth real money.

"Yeah, I think I kin place that Injun," he added. "*El Zopilote* usta have a cook what jest 'bout filled that description yuh give. He was a Yaqui an' a old-timer. Looks sorta to me like the Injun found that thing an' tried to make a gitaway with it. Mebbe he knew wheah theah was more of 'em. *El Zopilote* musta found out he had it an' lit out after him, but the other snake got him fust."

Ken nodded soberly. "Uh-huh, an' I wonder if me bein' heah ain't the reason the Buzzard is givin' the Triangle-Dot so darn much attention of late. Mebbe I'd better be movin' on."

Old Alkali swore until his mustache was scorched. "Yuh're stayin' right heah till they sow hell with grass seed," he concluded, "but I want yuh to stop prowlin' 'round in the brakes by yoreself."

Ken didn't stop, however. He was playing a lone-handed game, a dangerous game, but one he hoped might give him a clue to the secret hiding place of the bandit leader. He had had no luck in trailing the rustlers through the maze of canyons and *barrancas* slashing the stony hills that marched angrily up to the towering ramparts of the *Sierra Madres*. It was about like trying to trail a cloud through a snowstorm. So Ken started gambling his life against a hunch.

One morning the hunch began to get up on its hind legs and roar. Ken was skirting a strip of wooded bench which climbed along the bases of the rocky southwestern hills, when something yelled past his ear with that peculiar snapping crack made only by a slug fired from a high-power rifle. Ken whirled his horse toward the shelter of a clump of manzanita and, as another bullet-crackle screeched past, flung up his arms and toppled from the saddle. Low brush instantly hid him from view.

The horse halted at the edge of the thicket. Ken, crawling cautiously into the shadow of the manzanita, crouched beside the patient bronc.

"It oughta fooled him," he told the horse. "Mebbe he'll ride down heah to make sho', but I'm bettin' he hightails back to headquarters to tell his boss he cashed me in."

His eyes narrowed in sight-concentration. The smokeless powder used by the dry-gulcher left no telltale smudge, but high up near the edge of the lofty bench a shifting gleam flickered briefly.

"Sun shinin' on the sidewinder's rifle barrel," Ken reasoned. "Movin' away, now. You stay heah, hoss."

Silently he glided into the deeper growth. Twenty minutes later he crouched on the edge of the bench and examined two brass shells he had found there.

"Thirty-thirty ca'tridges," he muttered, "an' theah's wheah he tied his hoss, an' theah's his trail plain as the beer in a bartender's belly. Now to corral my cayuse an' jog along after that horned toad."

NIGHT found Ken camped in a sheltered ravine many miles to the southwest. He carried a blanket strapped behind the cantle, and there

was food in his saddle bags. He ate scantily, slept well and cooked his breakfast in the grey light of dawn. Toward noon he entered a narrow, wooded valley.

"I gotta strong workin' hunch this is the place I'm huntin'," he muttered. "Looks it, all right!"

The valley was of considerable length; and at its head stood a fairly lofty mountain from whose rounded summit rose a plume of dark smoke.

"Devil's stokin' up for dinner," Ken growled. "Well, heah goes nothin'."

He rode slowly up the valley, warily eyeing each thicket and clump of rocks. The thin bawl of distant cattle intensified his watchfulness, and the tangy smell of wood smoke brought him standing up in his stirrups.

"Gittin' hot, cowboy, gittin' hot!" he told himself. "Hold it, yuh jughead!"

A horse neighed, startlingly near. Ken rode into a deep thicket and dismounted. He looped the reins and loosened the cinches, gave the bronc a reassuring pat on his glossy neck and left him contentedly grazing. He knew the trained animal would not stray from the thicket.

"Now to find out wheah them sidewinders bed down," he breathed. "This is *Valle de la Luna,* all right, even if I don't see no moons."

First he came upon cattle, plenty of them, many head bearing the Triangle-Dot brand. There was a horse corral, also, and his lean jaw tightened as he recognized the bald-faced pinto that had been ridden by Tomaso, the slain Triangle-Dot *vaquero.*

"Jest wait till I git the layout o' this spread," he growled vengefully. "Me an' the boys'll ride back heah an' clean this nest of buzzards proper."

He was close to the lower slopes of the volcano now; and in the very shadow of the great cone he found the outlaw camp.

There was a long, low log shack, several dilapidated log cabins, a slovenly barn and a corral in need of repair. He could see figures moving about the cabins, and once a man came to the door of the long building and shouted loudly.

Ken worked nearer, taking advantage of the plentiful cover afforded by thickets and irregular clumps of stones. He reached a point slightly above the camp and settled down to watch. At his back was the mountain slope, and on either end the ground was open for a considerable distance. The stone outcropping behind which he crouched gave him concealment from the buildings, but his flanks were exposed. Absorbed in the activities of the camp, he gave this little thought.

Crash!

A bullet squalled over his shoulder, smacked the rock and showered his face with stinging fragments. Ken whirled, crouched, and his guns leaped to his hands. Not fifty feet distant stood a man blazing away at him.

Ken's sixes let go in a rippling crash. The man yelled shrilly and wallowed forward onto his face. From the camp below arose a pandemonium of shouts and curses.

CHAPTER III

Flaming Guns

AS he reloaded, Ken glanced quickly about. Men were boiling from the big cabin and racing up the slope. Ken fired coolly and carefully, dropping two of them and sent the others diving for cover.

"All to the good so far," grinned the puncher as he slipped in fresh cartridges.

But he knew it could not last. Already the outlaws were spreading out fanwise, and in a few minutes they would be on each side and behind him. There was but one thing to do and he did it. He dashed

swiftly up the slope, dodging from clump to clump, crouching for an instant behind a boulder or a bush to fling a couple of snap shots back at his pursuers.

More by good luck than anything else he downed a man. The others held back, their ardor somewhat dampened. Ken made good use of their reluctance and gained yards before they dashed forward again. He realized, however, that this deadly game of hide-and-seek could not go on much longer. It was but a matter of minutes until he would be surrounded and shot down.

He began anxiously to search the mountain slope for some gorge or canyon into which he might slip. Already dark figures were leaping and scrambling among the boulders to right and left of him. A bullet whirled his hat sideways on his head. Another plucked at his sleeve like a ghostly hand. He dashed around a clump of rocks, and a dark opening yawned directly before him and less than a score of yards distant.

Ken went into that cave like a sausage down a houn'dawg's throat. It might prove to be nothing but a death trap, but it promised some sort of shelter, and Ken was in the market for shelter of any kind. He stumbled over boulders that studded the floor just inside the entrance, and floundered on in what was for the moment utter blackness. Then, as his eyes accustomed themselves to the change, the shadows greyed and he could dimly see about.

"Can't make out no roof," he panted, "but she ain't more'n twenty feet wide. Wonder how far back she goes?"

The rocky floor was smooth after it left the entrance, and for a short distance it rose sharply. Then it dipped over a crest and tumbled steeply into darkness so thick and black you could cut chunks of it and lay them aside. Ken dropped flat behind the sheltering ridge and watched the white blaze of the entrance.

Almost instantly, dark figures silhouetted against the glare. Ken blazed away at them, his gun booming thunderously between the rock walls, and the figures vanished. Stealthy scufflings followed, and the scrape of boots against the rocks. The bandits were holing up among the boulders. Long lances of flame gushed into the gloom and bullets knocked chips from the lip of the rise. The cave became a regular hell's-half-holiday of racket.

From time to time Ken answered the bandits' fire, sweeping the gallery from side to side on the chance

that somebody might be trying to creep up close under cover of the darkness. He was comparatively safe from bullets where he crouched on the sharply descending floor, but his diminishing cartridge supply worried him. He glanced uncertainly into the black depths behind him and didn't like the looks of it at all.

"When all these damn shells give out, theah won't be a thing for me to do but hightail down inter that roofed-over chunk o' midnight," he decided gloomily.

The bandits increased their fire and the cavern howled and bellowed with the reports. Fierce yells of excitement and rage surged through the shadows; at times the moaning cry of a wounded man seeped through the hullabaloo.

THEN, abruptly, the shouts and the boom of gunfire were drowned by a hideous, growling screech. The bandits screamed their terror, but their cries were wiped away by a mightier voice as, with a rending roar, the arch of the cave

mouth crashed down, blotting out the daylight and crushing *El Zopilote* and his men like insects beneath a giant's foot!

Stunned by the terrific uproar, Ken crouched amid choking dust and stared into the utter darkness with dilated eyes. He made his way cautiously down the slope until he brought up against a mass of splintered stone. He struck a match and saw that it jammed the entrance completely.

"Now I know jest how a frog feels when he's crawled inter a milk jug an' somebody's corked it up on him," he breathed. "'Twould take dynamite to move that, an' I ain't got none. Mighta knowed all that shootin' would bring the roof down. Well, the Triangle-Dot won't hafta worry 'bout *El Zopilote* no more, but I got a darn strong notion they're gonna hafta git them another foreman."

For an instant sheer panic swept over him at the thought of dying of hunger and thirst in the black dark. Then, with a hoarsely growled curse, he got a grip on himself and deliberately turned his back on the barrier.

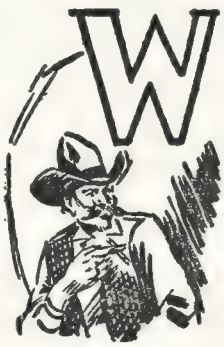
"Theah might be 'nother openin' somewheah," he reasoned. "I'll jest go an' see."

The going wasn't pleasant. Yard by yard he crept down into the crowding dark, saving his scanty stock of matches against a possible emergency. For all he knew, the next step would hurl him into some bottomless gulf; but anything was better than sitting down to await death in the awful black silence.

The passage still sloped steeply and the air was becoming warmer. Ken felt that he was burrowing into the very bowels of a volcano. Instinctively he quickened his pace. Then, with a gasping yell, he tried to hurl himself backward as his outstretching foot encountered nothing but empty space. His other foot dashed against a loose fragment of rock and he pitched forward into the dark. A faint, sullen splash drifted up from the abysmal depths of the gulf.

CHAPTER IV

Valle de la Luna



WEAK and shaking, a cold sweat streaming down his face, Ken Bolton lay where he had fallen across damp stone steps that plunged dizzily downward. The stairway, hugging the rock wall out of which it had been cut with incalculable labor, was so narrow that his feet dangled over the pit.

Struggling cautiously to a sitting position, he struck a match and looked about. Beside him the cavern wall stretched up, to vanish in the gloom, and less than four feet distant was blank emptiness. The feeble flame winked out and the darkness rushed down so intense as to be felt. Ken got to his feet and snugged against the damp wall.

"Reckon this is a case of no place to go but down," he growled. "Well, all right, but I sho' wish I'd borrowed a pair o' wings 'fore I started."

The descent was a nightmare. Careful step at a time, he took the stairs. All desire to hurry had left him. He quickly lost count of the steps and a queer feeling stole over him that he was walking down an unfolding ribbon of eternity, without beginning and without end.

"Infernal stairway runs right smack inter the middle kittle o' hell, I reckon," he despaired at last. An instant later he halted abruptly: his advancing foot had splashed in water.

Ken struck a match and stared at the smooth black expanse stretching away into the darkness. No ripple disturbed its placid surface. It looked like the combined oozings from all the graves in the world.

"She's liable to stretch clean 'round to the handle," Ken groaned, "an' chances are theah ain't no bottom a-tall. But heah goes!"

He stepped into the flood and was surprised to find the water not unpleasantly cold. Before it had reached much above his waist the stairs ended, and as he proceeded the water rose but little higher. Ken began to feel encouraged.

"Hell, an' it's gittin' light, too," he exclaimed after a few more hundred yards of floundering and splashing.

It was. A faint bluish radiance seeped through the darkness greying the shadows and throwing the nearby rock wall of the cave into dim relief. Ken's heart beat high. Then suddenly he swore sharply and halted in his stride. The light was rising from the water!

In amazement he peered downward, and as he gazed his flesh crawled and his hair pricked on his head.

The depths were swarming with monstrous luminous forms, moonbright, crawling, writhing—claws, feelers and dreadful protruding eyes. Gigantic crabs that lived in holes and under boulders. Aroused by the cowboy's passage through the water, they were swarming toward him. Shuddering with horror, Ken dashed through the glowing water.

"Hell's fire an' damnation!" he yelled as a sharp pain stabbed his thigh. One of the monsters had seized him in viselike claws.

Ken surged forward and broke its grip; and as another of the devilish phosphorescent things rose to the surface directly in front of him, he jerked his dripping gun from its holster and struck viciously with the heavy barrel.

THE crab, its shell shattered, set up a hoarse screaming and its fellows, perceiving it to be hurt, surged about it with reaching claws and chopping mouths.

Ken plowed madly through the glittering water, cracking shells and breaking claws until the cavern was an inferno.

Behind him the swirls of pale blue light rolled in pursuit.

Reeling, gasping, utterly exhausted, he stumbled on. And, just as his last strength was flowing from him, the water began to shoal. A moment later he struggled through the last shallows and sank panting upon the rock floor. He took a dozen gulping breaths, glanced over his shoulder and swore despairingly.

"The damn things are follerin' me right out onto the land!" he gulped, staggering to his feet again.

They were, but on land they were slow, clumsy creatures and Ken quickly outdistanced them. He heaved a sigh of relief as the darkness closed about him again.

"I'd ruther live inside of a black bull at the bottom of a well at midnight than have that kinda light!" he vowed.

And then light appeared again, a dull reddish glow that grew as he stumbled on. The air rapidly became warmer, a smell of sulphur stung his nostrils. He rounded a sweeping curve and halted before where the reddish glow beat against a flood of silvery radiance.

"If the Big Boss up on the Sky Spread ever made anythin' what looked better than that, He kept it fer Hisself!" Ken sighed.

The gloomy gallery had widened to a vast, almost circular, amphitheater. A few steps distant was a tremendous gulf from which surged the fiery light that melted into the moonbeams streaming down from where, far, far overhead, a starry sky rimmed the great cup with silver and blue.

Ken moved forward a few paces and stared down, depth upon vertiginous depth, to a coiling, bubbling lake of molten fire. Up from its surface streamed a wavering thread of dark smoke that vanished over the lip of the crater. Ken turned from the awesome spectacle of the lava pool and gazed at what stood in the full stream of the moonlight.

Winged and scaled, birdlike and serpentine, a great stone figure crouched against a wall of black rock. Its inscrutable eyes were of

reddish quartz and its mouth was the hooked beak of a vulture. Surrounding its feathered head-dress, fantastically carved in stone, was a gleaming crescent of silver. Silently the cowboy stood and gazed at the ghostly form of the god.

"Metzli!" he murmured at last. *"Metzli,* the moon god, an' this is the real Valley of the Moon. This was the old Aztec temple. The priests cut them steps so they'd have a back door inter this place. That old Injun musta snook in somehow an' grabbed off the little gold image. Wonder if theah's any more?"

Set in front of the moon god was an altar of jasper, its ominous blood channels burned and blackened, and crouched on pedestals at three of the four corners were tiny golden figures with crescent head-dresses, their close-set eyes crawling with strange fire.

The fourth corner boasted only a broken pedestal.

"Reckon the Injun got scared after he pried one loose," Ken reasoned. "Well, I been scared so darn many times t'night, theah ain't no more scare left in me; so I might as well have the rest o' the set to match up with the one I left at the *hacienda.*"

He wrenched the figures loose and stored them in his pockets.

"Come daylight, mebbe I kin see a way outa this hole," he told himself.

Utterly exhausted, he stretched out on the hard stone and slept for hours. Full daylight showed a hard and dangerous way up the crater wall, with places that made Ken's hair stand on end; but by mid-morning he crawled over the lip of the crater and gazed down into the peaceful Valley of the Moon.

"Reckon if any of *El Zopilote's* buzzard-chicks didn't git hawgtied by that rock they was so scared they sloped outa heah so fast yuh could heah 'em whiz ten minutes after they passed," he told the sorrel as he rode toward the Triangle-Dot.

OLD Alkali Anderson sighed regretfully as he examined the gem-eyed figures.

"S'pose now yuh got the makin's of a hefty roll yuh'll be ramblin' on again?" he mourned.

Ken Bolton grinned.

"I allus did hanker to own a interest in a fust-class cow factory," he said, "but at puncher's wages I was scared I'd hafta do my bustin' in a wheel-chair by the time I'd saved up enough *dinero* to git one. Now, this heah Triangle-Dot is a purty nice outfit, an' if yuh consider sellin' a slice—"

Old Alkali's big hand reached across the table. Both men smiled.

NEXT MONTH

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Outlaw Guns Resound

in

THE HIDDEN TRAIL

A Complete Novel of Rapid-Fire Action

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

Author of "Bullets and Beef," "Hoax Pokes," etc.

The HAIRY HERD

Desperately Price flung his horse between the charging steers and the men

A White-Headed Ranny Rides Home to Blast a Terror-Spreading Nest of Villainy Ruled by a Vicious Killer of the Rangelands!

By ARCHIE JOSCELYN

Author of "Mask of Doom," "Six-Gun Sovereignty," etc.

THE coulee was an ideal place for murder, and tonight someone had decided to make use of it. Bill Price saw that, even as his horse topped the rim and his eye caught the last dying gleam of a cook-fire in the coulee-bottom, a soft glow of red that seemed to close its eye and wink at him. Not far below it were the shadowy figures of sleeping men, blanket-rolled.

Where they slept the coulee was narrow, with high, rocky walls. Up above, at the head, it widened, like a spread-out fan. Close above it, a wider, darker blot betokened a night-

herd, and even as Price came in sight, ghostly figures were busy with the herd.

There was no moon, and the stars were only faint specks of yellow in a distant purple sky. For a minute, straining his eyes through the darkness, the cowboy, white-haired although his face was youthful, was puzzled. And then suddenly he understood, as the milling herd began to move, quickening to a run, riders flanking them on either side, a wildly waving white sheet fluttering terrifyingly behind them.

The men, sleeping in the coulee bottom, had driven the herd this far, then stopped for the night. And now these other riders of the darkness had surprised the rider on night duty, and were stampeding the herd, guiding it into the natural sweep of the coulee, to send it, wildly charging, down upon the unsuspecting, sleeping men.

So far, they had managed to work almost in complete silence. The high walls of the canyon would shut out all sound from above until the pounding herd were almost directly upon the sleepers. They would be trapped, given no chance at all.

Bill Price saw that much, without understanding the why of it, and acted. Little puffs of dust popped up beneath his horse's hoofs as he spurred. The dry, brown grass crackled and broke, instead of bending. He had to get far enough toward the head of the coulee to stand a chance at turning the running cattle, to shout a warning to the sleeping men.

A FAINT light caught the oncoming, ghostly herd, shining on their long, polished horns. A big roan steer was in the lead—twelve hundred pounds of bone and muscle. The cattle moved like shadows now, requiring little guiding or urging from the men who rode with them. A silent cavalcade, the herd crossed the skyline, dipped down toward the narrowing ravine.

Now their pace quickened to a gallop, heads lowering. The pounding hoofs were muffled in the grass of the coulee bottom, the faint red light growing in the east glinted on horns as on sword-blades. And now, with the herd well started, guided on by the closing coulee walls, the men who had been following turned back the way they had come, vanishing across the dim horizon like the figments of a nightmare.

Price yelled a hoarse warning as his own horse cut down into the coulee. The sleepers could hear him now, but they'd come awake dazed with sleep. Already the thunder of pounding hoofs was growing to an ominous roar. Desperately, the cowboy flung his horse between the charging steers and the men, jerking at his gun.

The big roan leader, excited and angry, bellowing back defiance, came on with lowered head, straight for the horse. It staggered a little at the impact of a slugging bullet, fell to its knees and slid. Two other steers dropped as the gun roared again, and the remainder swerved about their fallen bodies, hesitated momentarily.

But it had taken six bullets to drop three of them, and Price's gun was empty. Those behind pressed forward savagely at the smell of hot blood. Below, the sleepers had roused, were upon their feet, faces greyer than the coming dawn, reaching frantically for guns. A mammoth red steer, his horns out-jutting, curving forward and upward, came on, head lowered.

Price's horse tried frantically to escape, but now steers hemmed it in on three sides. The sweeping horns surged up, powerful heads and necks thrusting from behind, and with a scream of mortal anguish, the horse was half lifted off the ground, pitched, kicking, to lie a torn and inert mass.

Price leaped free, sprawling on the ground as he struck, but the body of the roan steer was a momentary barrier between him and the herd. By now, all five men who

had been sleeping below, quick to see the futility of trying to escape by running, had charged toward the herd, shooting and yelling together. Before the belching guns the herd leaders halted, bawling, those behind hesitated, and then the whole herd turned back upon itself.

"That was sure a white man's trick, friend—" one of the cowboys began, stopped in sheer amazement. "Bill Price!" he ejaculated.

Bill Price didn't answer. With a yell, he leaped to where one of the five men was down, with one of the wounded steers, maddened by excitement and pain, attempting to gore him. It had risen suddenly to its knees, the sweep of a long horn had caught the man as he tripped and fell.

Price's reloaded gun sprayed crimson. Slowly, swaying a little, the steer went down on its knees again, heavy head rolling from side to side, tongue lolling redly. Then it pitched broadside like a sliding mountain, and was still.

But the man lay equally still beside it, his chest spurting blood where one of the long horns had ripped the flesh open. Price dropped on his knees beside him.

"Dad!" he cried.

The eyes of Jim Price did not open.

Twist Hewlitt, rangy as a lodgepole pine and almost as thin, examined him expertly, tearing back the shirt to bare the wound.

"A right bad rake, but nothin' serious, Bill," he said reassuringly. "He'll pull through it."

The herd had scattered by now, their capacity for harm at an end. One of the other men stared at Bill Price as though beholding a ghost—the white hair above the youthful face, the hard, bitter lines about the mouth. And again the hair—close-cropped—the paleness of the face which new tan could not entirely hide.

"Where'd yuh come from, Bill?" he demanded. "I thought—"

The big puncher smiled faintly at the other man's sudden discomfort. In the growing light, his blue eyes were like the cold depths of a mountain lake.

"Sure yuh thought it, Sam," he agreed. "Yuh thought I was still in the pen—sent up for twenty years for cattle rustlin', and out at the end of six months. I broke jail—reckon they're on my trail now. But I'd heard—about Tom, and I had to get home. What's all this? These critters, and all?"

Twist Hewlitt stood up, still staring down at the unconscious boss of the Bar S. Reflectively he rummaged in a pocket, removed a gnawed looking brown plug and worried off a corner between two snaggle stumps of teeth which failed to meet.

"New herd we was takin' home," he commented, and spat explosively. "Durn lucky for us yuh happened along, Bill. How come?"

"Mostly luck, I guess. I did hear that you boys was somewhere in this section of the country, and of course I—I've been travelin' by night. Happened to see yuh—and them other *hombres*, startin' the herd down on yuh. Didn't know who yuh were, but I took a hand."

"Looks like somebody's tryin' to rub out the Bar S, complete. First yuh get framed as a rustler, which yuh never was. Next, yore brother Tom's murdered, and now tonight, this—to say nothin' of all the rustlin' that's been going on—"

THE injured man stirred, sighed. His eyes opened slowly, vacant for a moment, then lightened at sight of Bill.

"Bill," he whispered. "You here?"

"I'm here, Dad." The agate eyes softened a little.

"I knew—the Governor 'd pardon yuh—pretty soon. And mighty lucky—yuh're here now. We've bought this two hundred head—have to get 'em to the ranch. Yuh'll see to it, Bill?"

"I'll see to it," Bill Price agreed grimly. In the fast-spreading dawn, he was an incongruous figure, white

thatch of hair topping youthful face.

An hour later, with Jim Price resting comfortably in the shack of a trapper, a mile away, and with the herd regathered, they prepared to drive on. That hour had brought another gruesome discovery—the man riding night-herd had been murdered!

A rope had been tossed over his head in the darkness, before he'd sensed the peril that rode beside him, then the horse of his attacker had wheeled to jerk him from the saddle, drag him. A length of frayed rope had been cut off and left round his throat.

The remaining Bar S crew stared down grimly, then dug a grave. Twist Hewlitt, his mouth a savage line, voiced the general opinion.

"Bill, we're glad yuh're back. Right glad. And if the law, or anybody else, bumps ag'in us and acts fractious—well, they'd better come a-shootin'."

It was still a three days journey to the Bar S, and the steers were needed to fill the ranks of a herd depleted by constant rustling.

"Six months yuh've been gone, Bill," Twist mumbled between steadily rolling jaws. "And the rustlin' has kept right on. Bar S and Box SK herds have been sufferin' most, until Colonel Pierce is fair tearin' his hair, but he don't seem to have no better luck at stoppin' it than we do. I reckon likely Tom was on the trail of whoever was doing it—but they got him. We found him, out on the range, three rifle bullets in him—dyin'."

Price's jaw was set grimly.

"I heard that, and that's one reason I had to get back. Did he say anything?"

"Jes' two words. 'Colonel Pierce.' Reckon he wanted to get a message to the colonel, them always bein' such good friends, but he didn't have no time to say more. We found him too late. Colonel, he was all broke up. First you, sent to the pen, spite all he could do tuh help yuh, and then Tom—"

They crossed the dry bed of a creek. Twist Hewlitt spat again.

"Ain't been no rain to speak of since yuh left last spring," he mumbled. "We'll reach the Springs, by night. No water in between. By the way, Bill, we got a warnin' not to try and make this drive—we was told we couldn't water at the Springs."

"Eh? Not water there? Why not?"

"Dunno. Jest warned. A letter—an' it wasn't signed—said that we couldn't. That was why yore dad was so plumb pleased to see yuh, Bill. He figgers yuh'll find a way to take the herd through."

"Yeh. When we come to water, I reckon likely they'll drink."

"Gov'ment land, anyway," Sam argued. "Cain't nobody stop us."

THE water holes known as the Springs glittered fresh and cool as they approached them, at the end of the long, dry day. Great willow and box-elder trees surrounded them, a touch of green in a dried brown world. But lying around in the shade of the trees, or grazing in the good grass which grew near, were fully a hundred head of other cattle. As they rode closer, nearly a dozen riders roused up from the shade and proceeded to swing to saddles, then they rode slowly out to meet the advancing Bar S herd.

"Somebody here, on guard, like that letter threatened," Sam Purdy muttered, anxiously.

Twist Hewlitt had been staring keenly ahead, his jaws motionless for once. Now they resumed action, and he spat mechanically.

"Them's Box SK boys," he informed. "Colonel Pierce's men. Guess this here's a plumb false alarm."

Bill Price said nothing. The others came up with them, still a mile distant from the lifegiving water which lay ahead. Some of their own herd were not far off. Price stared keenly at the lazy cattle, running his fingers nervously through his thatch of white hair, tensing to fresh interest as the new herd approached

them curiously. There were eleven men on guard here, all Box SK men, well armed. Colorado Charlie, who was Box SK foreman, was in the lead. His eyes narrowed suddenly at sight of Price.

"Yuh can't water here," he stated shortly. "Didn't yuh get a letter sayin' so?"

"What's eatin' yuh, Colorado?" Twist demanded. "The Bar S and the Box SK are good friends. Colonel Pierce wouldn't stand for this."

"Them's the colonel's own orders," the Box SK man returned flatly. "Yuh can't water here. Turn yore herd, Price, or we'll do it for yuh."

"What right yuh got to tell us anything about watering here?" Twist rasped angrily. "The Springs are Government land, open to all."

"Not any more. That land has been bought by the Box SK. For the last time, Price, are yuh going to turn them critters, or not?"

"No," said Price, shortly. His hands were hanging close to his gun belt, and the men of both outfits tensed. "I'd admire to have a closer look at yore lariat, Colorado—looks to me like a few feet have been cut off the end, recent."

For a moment, the air was brittle. Here was an open challenge. From the sudden paleness of Colorado's face, it was easy to see that he understood the allusion. But the Bar S men had a new look on their faces now. They had forgotten the odds against them. Sensing that eagerness, a trace of nervousness crept into the eyes of Colorado. It was displaced by almost a look of relief.

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about," he growled. "But yuh can argue things out with the boss."

Following his glance, Price tensed a little. Two fresh horsemen were riding hard toward them. The tall, soldierly appearing one, with the clipped grey mustache, was Colonel Pierce himself. The other was Bat McKinstry, sheriff.

"What's all this?" demanded McKinstry, as they galloped up. His eyes focused on Bill Price in some amazement. "So yuh come straight back here, after breakin' jail, eh, Price? Consider yoreself under arrest."

Bill Price was aware of the easy shifting of his own crew behind him, to get into better positions should the situation come to gun-settlement. But Colonel Pierce interposed.

"Not too fast, McKinstry. There seems to be some misunderstanding here. Bill, I'm glad to see yuh again—though not under jest these circumstances."

"What's this order to yore men about our cattle not drinkin' here?" Price demanded.

"Of course Bar S beef can water here. Colorado made a mistake. I've purchased these springs, and issued orders to keep off trespassers. But that doesn't apply to friends."

TWIST HEWLITT relaxed a little. Then he tensed again, for Bill Price hadn't grasped the olive branch held out to him.

"There was murder done, last night, Pierce—and I was just askin' Colorado there, how come a length had been cut off his lariat rope!"

"What's all this?" demanded the sheriff, puzzled.

"I'll tell you, Sheriff. While my dad and the rest of the boys here, was sleepin' in a coulee, last night, Colorado and some of his men rounded up our cattle and tried to stampede 'em down the coulee, to tramp 'em while they was asleep. First—"

"That's a lie!" Colorado choked.

"First," Bill Price went on calmly, "they had to get rid of the man on night herd. Yuh knew him, Sheriff. Surcingle Alton. He'd been roped in the dark, dragged to death. We found his body, this mornin', with a length of frayed rope that'd been cut off—and there was a blue strand in the rope, same as in Colorado's there. So I was askin' Colorado the why of his rope being cut off!"

Colonel Pierce spoke thickly.

"Price, are yuh trying to insinuate—?"

"I sure am, Pierce. Yuh figured the Prices would all be done for, before their cattle ever reached these

Springs, when yuh gave Colorado those orders. But yuh gave 'em, same as he passed 'em on to me. As to yore owning it now, why—yuh're a liar, Colonel. A liar, a cattle-thief and a murderer, and I'm calling yuh, right now!"

For a moment, silence held. Incredulity was scrawled on every face. Men simply did not talk that way to Colonel Pierce, who had always been a warm friend of the Prices.

A red wave, succeeded by sudden whiteness, was on the colonel's clean-shaven face. He made to speak, seemed to choke on the words. The sheriff intervened hastily.

"Here, here, Price," he expostulated. "Have yuh plumb taken leave of your senses? Them's mighty serious charges to be makin' against a man that everybody knows is honest."

"He's fooled everybody into believing so, for a long time," Price conceded. "But I'm callin' him now —and provin' it. In the first place, he claims to have bought these springs. I tried to lease or buy them myself, a little over six months ago, and was informed by the government that they would not be thrown open to private sale or lease for at least a year, to anyone."

"But if the colonel says—"

"He lies. And I repeat that he's a cattle-thief and a murderer!"

Colonel Pierce was breathing hard. Now he burst out suddenly.

"McKinstry, have I got to sit here and take these insults? I've put up with a lot, because I always liked the Prices, but there's a limit. If yuh'd jest ride off, for a little while—"

The sheriff shook his head grimly.

"Yuh've made serious charges, Price. Either prove 'em—or I'm takin' yuh back to jail, right now."

"I'll prove them, all right. As for the Springs here, yuh can find out about that by inquiring of the proper authorities—"

"I said proof right now," the sheriff snapped. "How about them cattle-rustlin' charges?"

"See for yoreself. I'd like to ask yuh, Sheriff, what the Box SK brand is doing, there, on that steer?"

By now, forgotten by both sides alike, the two herds were mingling.

Price pointed to a steer which had ranged up close.

"The Bar S never sold a single head to the Box SK. And there's another Bar S steer with a Box SK over-laying our brand."

AGAIN the silence fairly crackled. Colonel Pierce was about to explode. Bat McKinstry held up a hand, spoke sharply.

"I'll handle things, Colonel. Can yuh prove that, Price?"

"I'll prove every word I say. Those two steers, and that one, and that one with a white spot on its shoulder —they're all Bar S steers. And I can probably find a lot more in the bunch around here."

By this time, Colonel Pierce had regained control of himself, though his white face indicated that his temper was at the boiling point.

"I'll just trouble yuh to make good on that, sir, by gad. And if yuh don't, yuh'll settle with me, sir, before the sheriff takes yuh back. McKinstry, I invite yuh to examine any or all of those steers and see for yoreself if there's any indication that they were ever Bar S cattle."

A couple of the cowboys flipped ropes over one of the indicated steers to hold it securely for inspection. The sheriff dismounted and examined it carefully, as did several of the others, Price included. Twist Hewlitt had forgotten to chew, while he still sat his horse, grimly alert, the Bar S men behind him.

"I can't see anything wrong with that brand," the sheriff said faintly. "I'm afraid yuh'd have a hard time, anywhere, provin' that ever was yore steer, Price."

"Kill it," Price snapped. "The skin will show. You'll notice that, if put on carefully, the upper bar of the box would overlay our bar, and the K follows the S nicely—and naturally, since the Box SK was made for that purpose in the first place. No one ever suspected, before, that a big outfit like the Box SK, with a man supposed to be as scrupulously hon-

est as Colonel Pierce, would stoop to such a trick. But I suspected him for a long time, and now I know. Kill the steer."

"It would be interesting to hear how yuh know," the Colonel sneered.

"I'll show yuh. See this hair of mine? White, you'll notice. A little over a year ago it was black."

"Very interesting, but what has that to do with this?"

"I'm telling yuh. It was black, but starting to fall out pretty bad. So I bought a bottle of hair tonic in town. And Twist there, figured to play a joke on me. He filled my bottle with a mixture of his own—a horse liniment that would fairly take your skin off, and some other things. I rubbed it on, before I discovered the trick."

Twist Hewlitt reddened uncomfortably. "That's true," he mumbled. "I was a gosh-darn fool, Bill."

"Yeh. But I'm glad yuh done it, Twist. Pretty soon my hair started to change color, and I got a hunch. I put some of the same mixture on a few other hairy animals—and in a few weeks, it always changed the color of their hair. After that, being suspicious of the Box SK, but not having any proof, I went around and doped every single head of Bar S stock on our range."

He pointed with stabbing finger to half a dozen steers ranging close by, all branded with the Box SK.

"Yuh'll see a white spot on the inside of the right foreleg, on that one—marked like an X. That one has a mark on its tail—a white ring around it. There's an O on the hind leg of that steer—marks that ordinarily wouldn't be noticed much, all a little different, but none of them belong. And yuh can take yore choice, Sheriff. Kill any one of those steers you please, skin it, and yuh'll find the Box SK overlaying the Bar S. Yuh know for yoreself that it'll show, on a skinned hide."

The colonel was listening now in stunned silence. The sheriff's air of incredulity had vanished.

"Yuh asked for proof. I'm givin' it to yuh—not to mention that cut rope of Colorado's—"

Pierce leaped suddenly, then his gun was in his hand. Every man had seen the draw—more, they had seen the mask torn from the colonel's face, leaving it exposed in its stark ferocity. Plainly, he realized that the game was up. He had drawn his gun, and he was reputed the fastest man on the draw in the country.

ONLY one gun spoke. Colonel Pierce stood for a moment, incredulity spreading over his face, then he was swearing in amazement and looking at his bloody hand. His gun lay in the grass.

Colorado sat, arms in air. Twist Hewlitt stared at him across a leveled gun.

"I wish yuh'd been a wee mite faster, Colorado," he growled. "I'd 've admired to plug yuh, rememberin' Surcingle."

The sheriff stared. Then his face changed, and, producing a pair of handcuffs, he snapped them on the colonel.

"If I'd been you, I think I'd've plugged him right, Price," he grated. "That was as dirty a try at murder as I ever saw."

"I preferred to keep him to hang," Bill Price answered quietly. "Yuh'll remember that my brother Tom was shot down, and that they found him dying. But he lived to say just two words, when they asked him who had done it."

"And those words were 'Colonel Pierce,'" McKinstry nodded. "We didn't understand 'em then. But now—well, there'll be a new trial for yuh, Price, and evidence as to who the real rustler was. Which should be plenty for all needed purposes."

NEXT MONTH:

SHOWDOWN GUNS, Novelette by WILTON WEST

Zebra Jack, Outlaw

This Striped Burro Colt Packs Dynamite in His Flying Hoofs—and Uses It on a Desert Rat!

By
GEORGE GALLUP

Author of "Use Yore Head," "Rodeo Raiders," etc.

THEY were free now, heading across the open hills toward the Border and Mexico where wild herds ranged. It had happened so quickly that the muscles in Zebra Jack's shoulders and flanks still quivered from the excitement of it.

The burros in the pack train, hot and leg-weary under their loads of rich ore, had slowed to a snail's pace on the steep, dusty trail and then stopped. Zebra Jack, a colt marked from birth by a second distinct black stripe across his grey withers, perked up his ears and slipped away into the scrub oak down the draw. Jenny, his mother, glanced back warily and followed. They were almost hidden when one of the heavy ore boxes on Jenny's back caught on a dead limb. The limb snapped off with a loud crack. At once from up

The big cat sprang at Zebra Jack's throat as he charged

the trail came cursing and the clop-clop of running feet.

"Wild!" snorted Hi Scoggs. "Mojave Joe augurs yuh was born wild and we got to gentle yuh with kindness. Born ornery—that's what yuh was, and only floggin'll change yuh."

Scoggs picked up a club as he ran. Mojave was ailing that day and Scoggs had had to take the pack train out alone. Scoggs hated this desert country, the burros and everything that went with it. What he wanted was quick wealth in gold, and his old prospector-partner assured him they would find it just as soon as they got together a grub stake from this ore-packing contract.

"A man can't even stop for a coolin' drink without yuh sneakin' off into the brush and—"

He pulled up short, for there, standing in her place in the train, meek as if nothing had happened, was Jenny. Scoggs gave her a hard blow on the rump. He glanced about and saw two grey ears and a woolly head half hidden in the brush. The ears flattened against the colt's wiry mane as Scoggs sprang toward him and hurled the club at his head. Zebra Jack dodged nimbly and stood pawing, head low, teeth bared.

"BLAST yore ornery hide! Yuh act like yuh'd fight a man."

Scoggs kicked out viciously and caught the colt in the ribs. He kicked again. Zebra Jack whirled and his sharp heels flew out, striking the man in the groin. Scoggs sank down, writhing and groaning. The colt trotted over to the jennet's side. The two watched nervously.

The stocky driver got to his feet, found the club and came limping toward them, puffy lips set, eyes glaring. Fear spread among the burros and the pack train began to move.

"Whoa! Whoa, there!"

Scoggs ran limping, brandishing his club. The burros moved faster, then began to scatter in confusion over the hillside. Jenny, finding the trail clear, struck out at a trot, Zebra Jack scurrying nimbly ahead. Scoggs came still faster. Jenny, staggering and swaying under the heavy load, slid over the edge of the trail and fell. Half the ore spilled from the boxes.

Scoggs' club caught her across the rump. She struggled to her feet and ran headlong down the steep, brushy slope. The load was lighter now and Scoggs could not head them, or even keep up. Finally he stopped and whipped out his pistol. Rapid shots crashed and echoed down the draw. A bullet *zinged* into one of the ore boxes. Then the burros were out of range.

Zebra Jack and Jenny did not stop until they had left the pack train a mile behind, crossed the hills and reached a cool grove of cottonwoods and a spring. There they drank but did not rest long.

With a switch of her tail, Jenny lay down and tried to roll the boxes off. They were secured by iron bars bolted to them and looped over the wooden tree of the pack saddle. Their own weight held them in place. But as Jenny rolled, first one bar slipped off the tree and then the other.

Zebra Jack nosed around an old campfire where he had caught the scent of bacon grease. Mojave Joe often gave him a piece of bacon rind with a rich, salty flavor and rubbed him between the ears while he mouthed and nibbled it. They had been pals, these two, with Zebra following at his heels like a dog.

Jenny gave up trying to free herself of the pack saddle, which not only was bound fast under her stomach, but was held in place by leather straps reaching under her shoulders and across low under her tail. She got up and ambled off toward the southwest. Zebra Jack spurted out ahead of her, the feel of the open country making his blood race.

Back on the trail, a miner returning from town asked what all the shooting was about.

"Mojave's zebra colt kicked me in the groin and while I was down him

and his mammy got away," said Scoggs. "But don't tell Mojave. He's plumb looney over that Zebra Jack and'd just about be fool enough to get up out of his sick bed to hunt 'em."

A jackrabbit leaped from behind a mesquite and scurried away. Zebra Jack snorted and jumped wide, feigning great fright. He led on. The sun swung lower. Presently an ominous rattle sounded almost at his feet. The colt paused, ears perked forward, sniffing curiously. A queer, coiled creature blocked his way, its forked tongue lashing out between long fangs. Suddenly it struck.

The colt reared swiftly, snorting, fanning the air with his sharp forehoofs. One caught the snake behind the head, knocking it to the ground. Jenny was up in a flash, sweeping Zebra Jack aside. Her forelegs worked up and down like pistons and soon the diamond-back was a torn, writhing mass.

Jenny led out now and the colt was content to trail behind, pausing to nibble at sagebrush or pick off a mesquite beanpod. The sun sank and from a distant hill came the wail of a coyote. Once Zebra Jack paused, listening.

From back in the distance he thought he heard Mojave Joe calling: "Cope, Jenny! Co-o-ope, Zebry!"

Later from the back trail came the howl of a coyote, and then much yipping and sharp barking. A hungry pack had picked up the scent of the jennet and her colt. Zebra Jack, sensing danger, pressed close at her heels. Suddenly there were slinking shapes all about them. The jennet broke into a gallop, then a run. The colt's long, big-jointed legs flew like the wind.

Far ahead Jenny saw a light, which would mean men. She swerved, heading for it. A coyote swept in, snapping at the colt's heels. Jenny whirled on the animal and it backed away, snarling. The others pressed in, trying to separate the colt from his mother, but Zebra Jack stayed close, touching her side as they ran.

The pack massed in front of them and as Jenny charged one which came close, another coyote snapped at Zebra Jack's heels. He whirled and charged, too, ears back, head low, teeth bared. Almost at once another coyote sprang on him from one side, sinking its fangs in the thick hide on the back of his neck, bearing him down. The pack closed in.

With a throaty, terrifying bray, the jennet whirled. Trampling one coyote under her hoofs, she sank her teeth into the back of the one on the colt, lifted and shook it, tearing out a great patch of hide. The animal fled, yelping. She reared and came down on another with her driving forehoofs. Another she caught with her heels, cracking its shoulder bones.

Zebra Jack's own heels and forelegs were threshing out and presently, bleeding, he was on his feet. He met the charge of a fierce coyote, reared and beat the animal down. With a yelp, the coyote darted away, limping. Side by side, flanks quivering, the colt and mother stood, facing the now circling, whining pack. One coyote lay dead, three could barely drag themselves away and others limped as they moved.

They did not charge again, for suddenly a gun crashed, spurting flame. Again and again its lead *zinged* and whined at the fleeing coyotes and Mojave Joe, sitting aboard a borrowed horse, was calling:

"COPE, Jenny! Cope, Zebry—yuh little rapscallion."

For days after that, Mojave was laid up with a burning fever. When visitors came down to his and Scoggs' shack from the mine camp Mojave would brag:

"Yes-siree! Them two fought off a whole coyote pack—fit 'em to a standstill. When I come onto 'em there in the dim moonlight I couldn't shoot right away for watchin'. Zebry, the dang little coot, knocked one down his ownself, with his paws.

Yuh oughta heard that coyote yelp and light out from there."

"Yuh must 'a' taken the jennet back east to see a circus," drawled a miner, "the colt bein' extra striped thataway."

MOJAVE JOE grinned proudly, but shook his head.

"No, but the Mexican I got Jenny from said she'd been runnin' with a wild bunch down below the Border. Zebry's got a wild streak borned in 'im. I'm tryin' to gentle him by kindness. But I figger one of these days he'll be lightin' out and hell can't stop him."

Scoggs turned sullen because Mojave insisted that Jenny be given a rest and refused to let him use her in the pack train. One night when Mojave was on his feet again and had gone up to the camp to visit, Zebra Jack poked his head into the lantern-lit shack looking for him. Scoggs was trying to drown his hate for the desert in rye whiskey. He drained the bottle and hurled it at the colt.

"Get out, yuh little hellion!"

Zebra Jack laid back his ears and pawed defiance. Scoggs grabbed up the lantern.

"By gad, now Mojave's away, it's a good time to learn a couple of mountain canaries somethin'."

The colt scurried away, braying raucously. But Jenny was tied to a tree. Scoggs looked about and found an oak club three feet long.

"I'll learn yuh to foller that colt off into the brush and hide every time the pack train stops. Blast yore hide, I'll learn yuh!"

The grey jennet dodged, groaning as the blows fell. Finally one caught her between the eyes, and she sank to the ground, senseless. As Scoggs turned, he saw the burro colt a few feet away, ears flat, teeth bared. Scoggs swung out his foot in a vicious kick at him. Zebra Jack whirled, his heels shot out and caught the lantern. Glass crashed and flaming oil flew over Scoggs.

Scoggs stood a moment, paralyzed, then with a terrified yell, tearing wildly at his flaming clothes, he ran for the shack. Reaching for the water bucket, he brushed against a blanket hanging from a bunk. The fire leaped to the woolly stuff. He burst from the shack, running for a trough fifty yards away.

Trembling with fright, Zebra Jack went over and nosed his mother. She lay still.

A sizzling sound came from the water trough as Scoggs plunged in, and then groaning and cursing. Crackling flames licked out from the door of the shack and along the roof, spreading light across to the brushy canyon sides. Shouts came from the camp further up.

Zebra Jack watched and listened, his long ears perked up and pointing as he turned this way and that. Jenny began to thresh about. Suddenly a yell issued from the trough.

"Godfrey, our grub stake money was hid in Mojave's bunk. It's burnin'!"

Scoggs, a ghastly, half-naked figure, staggered in frantic haste toward the burning shack. The flames drove him back. He picked up a big rock and turned vengefully on the jennet and her colt.

"You done it. I'll kill yuh both. I'll kill yuh!"

Zebra Jack backed away, pawing. Jenny got to her feet, straining at the rope.

The flames in the shack reached the cartridge belts and guns. Shells exploded in terrifying, staccato blasts. The jennet leaped up and lunged to the other side of the tree. The rope jerked her about, then snapped.

Scoggs' rock caught her on the rump as she ran, limping, stumbling, with Zebra Jack leading the way. Mojave's partner picked up another rock, but staggered and fell. Zebra and Jenny fled down the canyon and kept going.

After Scoggs had been carried on a makeshift stretcher down to the town, he told that he had gone out to feed Jenny some oats and Zebra

Jack had whirled on him without warning, kicking the lantern and throwing flaming oil over him.

"He ought to be tracked down and shot," said a miner. "That burro's goin' to be a outlaw, a man-killer."

Mojave Joe looked at his partner and saw that he would be scarred for life. He figured Scoggs had not told a straight story, but he could not desert him now.

"Yuh still think we'll find that gold, Mojave?" Scoggs asked.

"YOU bet. It's a cinch—just as quick as we can get us together another grub stake."

Returning to the shack ruins, Mojave found the bloody club, the torn ground where Jenny had threshed about, and the snapped rope still tied to the tree. He glanced off toward the Border, muttering:

"I'll find yuh again one of these days, Jenny and Zebry, and I'll make it up to yuh. When we strike it rich, I'll put yuh in a pasture with grass stomach high, and give yuh all the oats yuh can eat on the side."

Bruised and lame as she was, Jenny pushed on doggedly. In the heat of the day, they would find shade and rest, then as it grew cooler they would move on, pausing often to graze, but steadily putting distance behind them. They crossed the Border and Jenny led west into the mountains. They had not seen a man or an adobe hut in days. Up and up they went into high timber.

One night, after they had gone far down the western slope, a cool breeze at their backs, Jenny drew up snorting. But she had caught the scent too late. A great cougar sprang, snarling, from a bank, sinking its fangs in Zebra Jack's neck and bearing him down.

Jenny, still weak and lame from Scoggs' beating, whirled on the big cat, lashing at it with her fore hoofs. Zebra Jack struggled to shake the animal off, as the cougar tried for his throat. Jenny sank her teeth in the cougar's back and tore out a strip of fur and hide.

Snarling, its long tail lashing from side to side, the mountain lion backed away and sprang. Jenny reared to beat the animal down with her hoofs, but sharp claws ripped the flesh of her head and she whirled, kicking. Zebra Jack charged in. The cougar sprang, bearing him down.

With an agonized half bray, the jennet tore at the cougar, ripping another strip of hide and flesh from its back. The animal rolled over, ripping at her with its claws as her hoofs crashed down. With a sudden leap it fastened its fangs in her throat and held. Jenny went down, kicking and trying to get at the attacker with her teeth. Its claws were ripping the flesh on her stomach to shreds and tearing at her entrails. Zebra Jack, weakened and dazed, charged in blindly. One of his sharp hoofs caught the cougar's left eye, laying it open.

The animal released Jenny's throat and sprang at the colt. Zebra Jack reared, pawing, but was carried back by the cougar's weight. Jenny, blood spurting from the wound in her throat, swept in. The half-blinded cougar did not see her. Rearing, she brought down the full weight of her fore half on the lion's side. Ribs snapped, tearing into the animal's lungs. Its wild cry of pain echoed through the canyon.

So the three fought, Zebra Jack battling weakly and helping little except to throw the cougar open to Jenny's attack. Finally, one leg broken, blood flowing from its lungs, the cougar limped away into the brush to die. Jenny stood watching with eyes fast glazing. Her knees sagged. She toppled over.

Zebra Jack took some of her warm milk and lay down. After a long time he got up and pressed his nose against her body. It was cold and stiff.

For two days he grazed nearby. Then thirst drove him on down the trail. Down and down he went. The bray of a wild jack echoed up through the hills. Zebra broke into a trot and came to the herd.

"I don't know what this idee of yore'n is," said Mojave Joe, "but somethin' tells me I'm goin' to be again' it."

"I wish them blasted jacks would quit brayin' so a man could get some sleep," Scoggs growled. "There's hundreds of 'em waterin' at this old, deserted ranch here below the Border, and all of 'em rollin' fat."

"Yuh said yuh had a cinch idee to raise another grub stake quick and soon's we got to this ranch yuh'd spill it. Well, here we are."

"Yeah. For more'n two years yuh've been promisin' we'd strike it rich. We've got and used up three grub stakes. We've got to git another one and that's why I brought yuh here before tellin' yuh—so you'd either have to do it or starve.

"There's a Mexican down at Orizaba that's built up a thrivin' soap and candle business. He can't get enough fat, so he's payin' a good price. Right here at this ranch is hundreds of pounds of fat runnin' loose on the hoof, unbranded and unclaimed."

"Yuh mean them burros? No sirree, I ain't a-goin' to do it. But I'll tell yuh what—we might catch and break some of the young 'uns to pack and then sell 'em at the mines across the Border."

"Too far. And what'd we get for 'em? Two or three dollars apiece. Howsomever, we'll have to break some to pack this fat down to Orizaba."

Late into the night they argued an finally Mojave Joe gave in.

"But it ain't right," he muttered to himself. "We might be killin' some of Jenny's or Zebry's kin."

The burros were easy enough to trap. The water had been troughed in hollowed logs from the little spring to a large trough in a corral. There had been enough for all the burro herds, but there was none outside the corrals. Scoggs fixed a long rope to the main corral gate, so he could hide and pull it shut when a herd came in to drink.

Mojave Joe busied himself breaking burros to pack and helped render the fat, but he would not help with the trapping, killing or skinning. Their market in Orizaba proved almost as good as Scoggs had been told it would, and their grub stake grew rapidly.

"Yuh see that grey jack off on the hill there?" asked Scoggs. "'Pears like he's just about the king jack of 'em all. Saw him fight a big, mouse-colored 'un out there one day and of all the kickin', pawin' and chawin', I never saw the like. The fur shore flew, but it wasn't long until the mouse-color up and took to his heels, and I ain't seen 'im since.

"This grey's shore a slick 'un—him and a big old black that don't seem none anxious to meet. I left the gate open the other night. The grey snuck in, but while he was gulpin' down water, he saw the gate movin' and darted for it like the wind. Hit it so hard the gate was dang near busted off its hinges. Pushed it open and got away."

Mojave stood looking across to the hill. His squinty old eyes began to brighten. Scoggs picked up his rifle.

"He's smart, but I'll get 'im, all right."

"NO, yuh don't," snapped Mojave. "Put down that gun."

The old prospector went into the 'dobe shack and came out with a piece of bacon rind. He walked slowly toward the hill.

Zebra Jack had been to another watering place far back in the mountains, but for days he had been held here by curiosity, watching the activities of these men. As the half stooped figure of the old prospector approached, he turned to run.

"Cope, Zebry! Co-o-ope!"

Zebra Jack stopped in his tracks. Then turned about, ears forward. He snorted, trembling, yet something held him.

"Cope, Zebry. Here's a little goody for yuh."

The big grey jack with the two black stripes across his withers

trotted forward away, head high, snorting, pawing excitedly. Scoggs passed one hand across a scar on his cheek that had been made by fire. His puffy lips set. Hate welled in him.

"Come back, Mojave!" he shouted. "He'll charge and cut yuh to pieces!"

The old prospector moved on at a slow, even step, calling softly now, "Cope, Zebry. Co-o-ope!"

The big jack darted forward again. He paused. A rifle crashed and Zebra Jack felt a searing, numbing pain in his neck near the shoulder. His legs gave way beneath him and he fell, threshing about helplessly.

"THE dang fool! The crazy idjit!"

Mojave Joe ran to him and put the bacon rind between his lips. Zebra Jack stopped threshing about and began to mouth and nibble the rind. Mojave stroked his head and rubbed between his ears. He stuffed his bandanna into the wound to check the blood flow.

"Reckon Scoggs was afeared yuh was goin' to hurt me," he tried to explain. "Shorely never shot yuh just out of plain cussedness."

Presently, Zebra Jack got to his feet but did not run. The prospector caught his mane and pulled gently.

"Le's go down and get a drink, and then I'll doctor yuh up proper."

Zebra Jack went, a little fearfully, down to the corral. When he neared it he trotted ahead and drank in great gulps. Then, lifting his head, he caught a scent that stirred anger in him. On the other side of the fence he saw Scoggs. He laid back his ear, pawing.

"Turn him out," cried Scoggs. "He'll kill me, I tell yuh!"

"Try treatin' him gentle. I reckon he's afeared yuh're goin' to beat 'im."

Scoggs walked away, carrying the rifle and cursing under his breath.

"This here ointment," Mojave said, "maybe stings and smells somethin' awful, Zebry, but it'll cure yuh and keep off the pesky flies."

Scoggs said hardly a word as they ate supper. When they were done eating, he began to talk.

"Mojave, I know yuh ain't goin' to take and make a work animal out of Zebra now. Wouldn't be fair, after he's growed up wild and free. Turn 'im loose, for he ain't never goin' to be happy any other way."

"No." Mojave Joe shook his head. "He's got a rep' of bein' impossible to catch. Somebody'll bring him down with a shot. Then they'll sell 'im off to be beat and mistreated, carryin' back-breakin' loads the rest of his life. Hi, I'm takin' him along and when we strike a bonanza, I aim to put 'im in a pasture where the grass is stomach deep, and give 'im all the oats he can eat on the side."

"Then yuh and me are partin' right here. He's done scarred me for life, and I ain't goin' to risk him killin' me some night while I'm layin' in the open asleep."

Mojave went to his bunk, got out the money they had saved for a grub stake and divided it half and half. Scoggs took the cash sullenly. They turned in but Scoggs did not sleep. He got up and went over to Mojave's bunk.

The old prospector's half of the grub stake was almost under his head beneath the blankets. Scoggs went back and got his pistol. He pushed his hand under Mojave's head to get the money. Mojave stirred, sat up. The barrel of Scoggs' pistol caught him behind one ear and he slumped back.

Taking the money, Scoggs dressed hurriedly and went out to pack a burro. Wild, mad braying in the corrals led him to look. A big black jack, splotched with the scars of many fights, was in the large corral, and he and Zebra were trying to get at each other through the fence.

"I'll fix Mojave for ever gettin' me into this," muttered Scoggs. "The black'll lick Zebra shore, with that wound in his neck, and run 'im plumb out of the country. By gad, I'll make 'em fight right there in the corral."

He slipped over to his trap rope and pulled the gate to, then climbed along the fence, opening the gate between the two corrals.

The jacks charged together, rearing, pawing, biting. Scoggs sat on the fence and bit off a chew of tobacco, watching.

"Get 'im, black 'un. Kill 'im."

Zebra beat the black to his knees, then Black 'Un sank his teeth into the neck wound. The ointment Mojave had rubbed there was bitter and sickening, but the black held, teeth sinking deeper. Zebra turned, twisting, reaching for the other's throat. He caught low, tearing out flesh. The black reared, loosening his grip.

Zebra whirled suddenly and kicked out with his heels as the black veteran came down, one hoof catching him between the eyes.

Black 'Un staggered and Zebra swept in quickly, beating him down with his fore hoofs. The black dropped to his knees and Zebra tore at his throat.

With a low curse, Scoggs slipped down from the fence. He whipped out his gun and came close to the whirling, fighting burros, looking for a chance at the grey. Suddenly the black turned and ran. Zebra began a bray of victory.

Scoggs fired. His bullet caught Zebra in the neck. The big grey jack whirled and charged, Scoggs fired again. Then Zebra was on him, beating him down with his fore-hoofs. The gun fell from his hand.

"MOJAVE!" screamed Scoggs. "Mojave, save me!"

Scoggs fought back feebly with his fists as he half crawled, half ran for the water trough.

He swung at Zebra. The grey jack whirled and kicked. The hoofs caught Scoggs in the stomach, knocking the wind from his lungs and half lifting him into the trough. The burro reared and a forefoot caught Scoggs on the head, stunning him. He fell into the water and his head went under.

Mojave came staggering out of the house, gun in hand.

"Scoggs, where are yuh—yuh rotten skunk!"

He heard the threshing in the water, saw Scoggs' head come up and then sink again; saw Zebra Jack, blood flowing from his neck and shoulder. Zebra turned and came toward him. Mojave tried to climb over the fence, but fell back. He staggered around to the gate, came in and pulled Scoggs from the trough. For an hour he worked with him, forcing the water from his lungs and trying to restore his breathing. Mojave raised up, shaking his head.

Then he began to doctor Zebra Jack's wounds. When he had finished, he went and opened the corral gate.

"Maybe Scoggs was right," he said. "Maybe yuh wouldn't never be happy, since yuh've run wild and free so long. Now yuh can go, if you want—and be the king jack of the range."

Zebra Jack paid no attention to the open gate. He came and rubbed his nose against Mojave's arm. The old prospector put his arm about the big grey's neck.

"Dang it, my pardner throwed me down. But yuh're a-goin' to stick, are yuh? Zebry, yuh and me 're goin' to find a reg'lar bonanza, and when we do I'm goin' to put yuh in a pasture with grass plumb up to yore stomach, and give yuh all the oats yuh can eat, on the side."

In Coming Issues of POPULAR WESTERN: TEXAS MAN, *a Bang-Up Novel of the Border by* H. BEDFORD JONES — *and* HOGLEG CANYON, *a Rapid-Fire Action Novel by* J. ALLAN DUNN

WIN A CASH PRIZE!

Rope an Award by Lassoing Mistakes in this Picture—
List of Contest No. 3 Prize-Winners Below!

DIDJA ever see a saloon without a brass rail for the men's feet? Well, yuh see it now, in th' above picture.

Also, yuh'll notice th' bartender suddenly sprouts long hair in his reflection in th' mirror.

This is th' seventh in a series of contests givin' yuh a chanct t' show what yuh know about th' West. Th' artist what drew th' above work of art got kinda mixed up an' we're countin' on you t' catch all th' errors he made.

Grab pencil an' paper and make out yore list o' mistakes in this drawing. Then send in yore list pronto—neat an' handsome, an' th' closin' date's April 10. Write "Contest No. 7" on yore envelope. First prize, fer best an' neatest list, $15; second, $10; third, $5.

Here are the contestants who came out on top in Contest No. 3:

First Prize: Charles McCroden, Lake City, Minn.
Second Prize: Collins Foster, Morrow, La.
Third Prize: Walter H. Prine, 4905 Corinth Ave., Cincinnati, O.

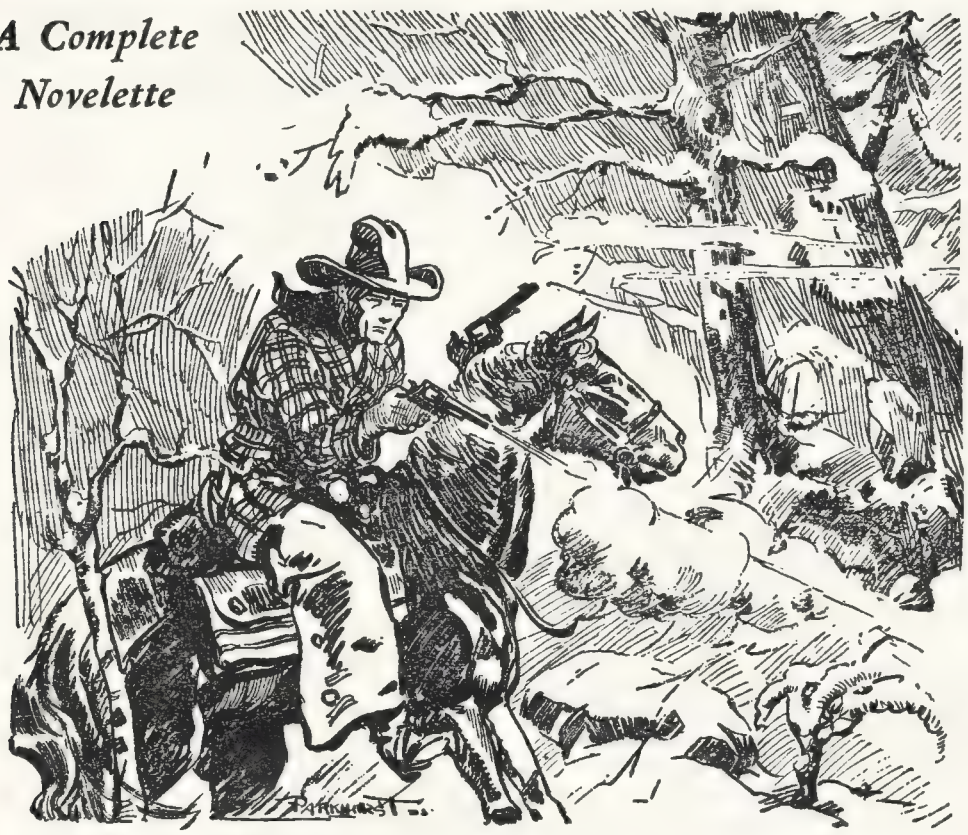
Honorable Mention: James B. Wood, 2116 Hanover Ave., Richmond, Va.; E. B. McCurdy, Coffee Creek, Mont.; Jim F. Timmins, 124 Kaufman St., Waxahachie, Tex.; Earle Lundwell, 604 N. Wilkes Ave., Davenport, Ia.; M. L. Wilsman, Burr Oak, Kan.; Lovella Akin, 608 E. Pacific Ave., Albuquerque, N. Mex.; Clyde Knight, 3334 L St., Vancouver, Wash.; Enid Hakes, 105 DeWitt Place, Ithaca, N. Y.; Mrs. Merle L. Barlow, Holcomb, Kan.; W. S. Dobson, Red Lodge, Mont.; Emil Kotvan, 901 N. Leclaire Ave., Chicago.

Many thanks tuh all. Yore letters were swell.

RULES: Everybody may compete except members of the staff of POPULAR WESTERN and their families. In the event of a tie, entries of similar merit will each receive the prize competed for. Mail your list of errors to Contest Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 22 West 48th St., New York City. Contest No. 7 closes April 10, 1936.

Sheriff Blue Steele Rides Alone to Bring

A Complete Novelette



PAINTED POST

CHAPTER I

Blood Money

THE night faded, baring a sky blue with cold. But "Squawfoot" Skinner was no man to admire the beauty of a desert dawn. He hunched his back against the raw wind, blew on his numb knuckles, then leaned from saddle and tacked up the last of those strange reward notices.

For a week of nights, Squawfoot Skinner had ridden throughout Indian County, posting every trailside with those sinister signs.

This one, crudely daubed on a square of white muslin, he spread at eye level against the lone cottonwood that shed its scattering leaves across the Painted Post horse corral.

It was a daring taunt to every rider who entered or left the town. A bold challenge to Sheriff Blue

Beset by Snow-Blindness, this Fast-Shootin'

Gun Justice to Smoketree Desperadoes!

By the Cowboy Author—

TOM GUNN

Author of "The Sheriff of Painted Post," "Painted Post Guns," etc.

KILLERS

Steele, whose dark, quiet jail office was a short gunshot down the gusty street.

He jerked stiffly erect as a mocking voice came from the dusk-blurred gate of the corral.

"Sort o' slantwise an' crooked, ain't it? Mebbe yuh better jerk it down!"

Instead, Squawfoot rapped out an oath. He tried to pull his holstered gun at the same time. But his trigger finger was stiff and the swirling

Steele sent his horse leaping. One rider screamed and fell

Lawman Battles Against Human Buzzards!

alkali dust stung and blurred his eyes.

The delay cost him that tiny fraction of a second in which such grim, abrupt matters are decided. Flame tongued out from the corral and the wind whipped gun alarm through the town.

Deputy Shorty Watts scrambled out between the gate bars as Squawfoot swayed in his saddle, toppled, reached for the tree, missed and fell.

By accident he had obeyed Shorty's command. For his clutching fingers had snatched the square of muslin from the tree. Shorty grabbed it from Squawfoot's hand.

He read it swiftly:

DOWN WITH GUN LAW!
Earn $1,000 Reward!
Wrap Blue Steele's ears up in this & Deliver in Person to Smoketree Ranch!

Shorty stuffed the fluttering rag into his pocket and prodded a boot against his prisoner, who was moaning and hugging a bullet-pierced shoulder.

"It's all right, mister," he said cheerfully. "I aimed to rouse out Doc Crabtree, anyhow. On account of a sick hoss. Which explains how I happened to be here at the corral at such a bad-awful hour. Git up."

Squawfoot lurched painfully to his feet. He weaved a snaky course toward the jail-office. Shorty observed that he wore moccasins of dirty, fringed buckskin.

THE little deputy herded his prisoner inside at gun-point.

"Wake up, Sheriff," he chirped brightly. "We got comp'ny."

There was no answering stir, no creak of cot springs, though Blue Steele was a light sleeper.

"Sheriff!"

Suddenly alarmed, Shorty stepped past Squawfoot, struck a match and raised it toward the lamp bracketed on the wall.

Squawfoot, filled with quick, savage energy, grabbed for the little deputy's gun, twisted it from him and thrust the cold muzzle behind his ear.

"Don't move, yuh damn' redhead, or I blow your topknot off!" Squawfoot gritted out.

He backed with his slithering, moccasined feet toward the door. There was a step almost as silent outside on the board walk and Squawfoot gave a sharp grunt as he felt an ominous pressure in the small of his back.

The drawling voice of Blue Steele spoke.

"Reckon it was lucky that shot woke me. And that I sashayed outside for a look-see!"

Shorty, breathing grateful relief, struck another match and touched the wavering flame to the turned up wick of the lamp.

And a few minutes later they had Doc Crabtree there with his black satchel. The doc blinked sleepily and growled:

"Why can't yuh do yore shootin' in decent, workin' hours, Shorty?"

"Me, I didn't pick the time," the little deputy declared. "Yuh want to patch up this jigger or the hoss first?"

Doc Crabtree took a look at the prisoner, stretched out on one of the jail-office cots. Squawfoot was silent, but his face was grey with pain. The doctor sat down and reached into his black satchel, producing probe and lance.

Steele gave no attention as Doc Crabtree cut away the prisoner's shirt and bared the reddened wound. He was scanning the reward notice that Shorty had given to him. His face was a sardonic mask. The lean, long jaw was set hard. There was a strange light in his granite-grey eyes.

"Doc," he said abruptly, "I crave for yuh to do me a favor. Sudden. Right now."

Doc Crabtree was bent over his patient. He grunted over his shoulder.

"Yeah? What?"

Steele folded the rag of muslin and thrust it inside a pocket of his worn, calfskin vest, just under the star that had almost become a part of that garment. He got to his feet and stood lean and tall beside the cot.

"Give me a pair," he said, "of fresh, crisp ears!"

CHAPTER II

Smoketree Ranch

SQUAWFOOT was a hard, sullen man. He had known the lingering agony of the maimed. Once in the Tetons he had frozen his feet in a blizzard. The loss of several toes made it impossible thereafter for him to wear saddle boots, like the other men. The prospect of a worse and humiliating disfigurement brought a yowl of terror from his lips.

"Oh, jeepers, Steele, don't!" he croaked. "There ain't no call to do a thing like that!"

Steele smiled scornfully.

"Sort of jumpin' at conclusions, ain't yuh?" he drawled. "I don't recollect specifyin' *whose* ears."

Squawfoot sagged back on the cot.

"Yuh're after information, is that it?" he breathed hoarsely.

Steele nodded grimly.

"Plenty of information," he declared. "All about Smoketree Ranch, whose set-up this is, everything."

Doc Crabtree started to work with skilled, practiced fingers, wadding gauze to halt the blood flow. Squawfoot gripped the edges of the cot and endured it. Gaspingly he spoke.

"It's George Griggs' set-up," he gritted.

Shorty gave an angry snort.

"That sidewinder Griggsy again! We shore made a bad mistake not hangin' him, 'stead o' sendin' him up tuh Yuma!"

Griggs, Caliente Valley rancher, recently sentenced to the Territorial prison after Steele had put the deadwood on him for numerous renegade activities, had always been Steele's enemy.

"Reckon yuh met Griggs behind bars," Steele said.

"This *hombre* a ex-jailbird?" said Shorty.

"Let out o' Yuma a month back," Steele told him. "Did a stretch for rustlin'."

Squawfoot glowered up at him.

"How come yuh reckernize me?" he panted. "We never met up, me an' you!"

"Yuh're described in a circular which came last week," Steele told him. "I knowed yuh right off. From that two-legged limp. How many owl-hooters holed up at the Smoketree? And if they crave my ears, why don't they collect 'em their own selves?"

Squawfoot squirmed as Doc Crabtree soaked the bandage with antiseptic. His low forehead was beaded with pain.

"Around a dozen. They'll git yuh all right, Steele. Else I wouldn't be tellin' yuh all this!" He closed his eyes, breathing fast. "They'll finish yuh next time yuh head out o' town!"

Steel was opening a top drawer of his desk. He began pushing .45 cartridges into the empty loops of his two gunbelts. He hitched his holsters around till the twin, fancy-butted Colts snuggled closely to his hips.

"I wonder," he said. "I'm headin' from town *pronto*. Right now."

Shorty's freckled, homely face lighted with an exultant grin.

"Where at we headin'?" he demanded. "For Smoketree Ranch?"

Again the humorless smile played at Steele's thin, lipless line of a mouth.

"You're inquisitive as a empty-bellied bluejay, feller," was the sheriff's reply.

The first shafts of stormy sunrise stabbed through the jail office window, bathing the interior with bleak light. Steele reached up and lowered the lamp wick and blew out the flame. He tossed a key to Doc Crabtree.

"Lock up this *hombre* when yuh git him properly skinned and drawed," he directed. "Tell the Chink to feed him till we come back."

Squawfoot raised his ghastly face for a parting shot.

"*If* yuh come back, yuh mean!" he barked.

Steele went outside. He made for the horse corral, Shorty trotting to keep up with his long stride.

"Lookit here, Sheriff!" he complained. "The Smoketree is a good forty miles or better. Plenty snow in the high country. And I only got on my summer underwear!"

"Yuh'll find things plenty hot where we're goin'," was Steele's cryptic assurance.

At the corral Steele roped and swiftly saddled his "Smith hoss"—the fast, powerful steel-dust gelding that had carried him through so many frontier fights.

Shorty captured a chunky cayuse he called "Brownie," screwed down his short-stirruped kak, and they loped northward, soon dwindling to specks in the direction of the Caliente River crossing.

The far peaks were white-capped, long fingers of drift reaching down into the foothills. Smoketree Ranch lay beyond that rugged barrier of the Caliente Range. Winter gripped the Border country. The sun was bright but there was an icicle sharpness to the wind that raced over the frozen summit and swept the wide, desert basin.

It blew frosty streamers from the horses' nostrils and the warmth of their sleek sides felt good.

At the ford, where the trail dipped through a barrens of stark, leafless willows, Steele spotted another white patch of another reward notice stuck on a willow trunk.

He rode over to it, jerked it down, and folding it, stuffed it with the other that reposed in his vest pocket.

They reined splashingly through the gravelly shallows and made dripping signs on the yonder bank that were quickly effaced by the scouring wind. Shorty, on the shorter horse, was wet to the waist.

Then Steele swerved westward.

"We're lookin' in at the T Bar T," he said.

"Judge Bertram, he'll load up his sawed-off an' insist on joinin' us," Shorty replied, slapping his legs to warm them.

"I'd be plum astonished if he didn't want to," Steele declared.

Bertram, owner of the T Bar T spread was ex-officio judge of Painted Post and one of the solidest influences in Indian County. He was squarely behind everything that the two lawmen did. At times he had supported them with buckshot when the far-flung community resented Steele's firm, relentless law enforcement.

They saw two more of those "ear" posters on the trail to the T Bar T. Four of them bulged now in Steele's vest pocket.

They hit the ranch something like an hour before noon. Judge Bertram, fiftyish, white-haired but vigorous, his face ruddy with the cold, met them at the gate of a close-grazed pasture where he was winter-feeding from a fenced-in stack of wild meadow hay.

"By Godfrey, I'm mighty relieved to see yuh galoots!" the judge exploded. "Yuh saved me a ride into town! Look here!"

He swung open the gate and pointed to a now familiar square of muslin tacked on the weathered top board.

STEELE calmly collected it as he had the others.

They rode for the ranchhouse.

"What in dang-blasted hell's goin' on?" Judge Bertram blurted out. "I found one o' them posters on my north gate. An' yestiddy, Double-Whisky Hannigan, he fetched one in from the line camp on Sage Crick!"

"Night-rider named Squawfoot Skinner is the proud author," Steele told him. "Shorty winged him this mornin'."

Steele tersely told about their dawn clash. True to his habit of giving generous credit to his little deputy, Steele omitted relating the incident of Squawfoot's brief victory at the jail office.

"So it's Griggsy agin!" the judge boomed when Steele finished. "Lockin' up that scalawag is like trappin' a polecat! He spreads his scent all the farther!"

They unsaddled and soon were warming themselves beside a glowing fireplace.

From the antlers above the hearth, the judge took down his ten-gauge sawed-off to oil the breech and locks. Steele stretched out on a leather sofa, lit a cigarette and basked comfortably. Shorty peeled off his wet pants and hung them over the back of a chair in front of the fire.

A call came, sharp and clear, from out in the ranchyard, the shrill yipping of an excited cowboy.

Steele made a panther leap from the sofa to the front door. He jerked it open and sprang out onto the porch. The yell sounded again. Then two shots and the tremolo of racing hoofs. Shorty plunged out behind Steele.

"There they are!" he yelped, pointing.

Across the base of a small slope, two riders hurtled, one in close pursuit of another who bent low, hugging his saddle horn.

The pursuer was Double-Whisky Hannigan. He was yelling furiously, as he leveled a six-gun, and blasted twice more at the fleeing man.

They were heading up a herd lane that led to the open range beyond. To rolling country, juniper-dotted, where a fast and dodging fugitive had good chances for escape.

Steele's two guns were out beating a thunderous tattoo that whipped acrid powder fumes past the open doorway where the judge stood gaping.

Steele's lead raised a dust pattern around the fugitive. A pattern that shrunk and tightened as an invisible net of bullets closed in around the speeding target.

Good gun hands would have called it straining a .45 barrel, scattering lead that way at a quartering, leather-hugging man at a full two hundred yards. It would have been futile shooting for a gun hand who merely *used* Colts and was not a part of them, as Steele seemed to be.

The rider twisted upright suddenly, gestured a wild, agonized farewell to the sky with larruping arms and his slack legs lost the stirrups.

Hannigan reined in, vaulted to the ground, knelt and tooled his six-gun against the crumpled figure.

Steele smoothly holstered his hot guns. Then Hannigan stood up and flung both hands loosely outward in an ominous, significant gesture to those who understood that half-forgotten sign language of the early years.

It meant: "Finished, the end."

"By Godfrey!" gasped Judge Bertram, barging out onto the porch, trailing the sawed-off behind him. "That's shore pushin' lead!"

Hannigan lifted the limp body onto his own saddle and led his horse rapidly up the slope toward the ranchhouse. Bertram leaped from the porch and hurried down to meet him.

"NOW who an' what an' why?" blurted Shorty.

"We'll mighty soon know," Steele answered grimly, "though I got me a purty good notion already."

The dead man was middle-aged. His right ear was only a shrivelled scar.

"Reckon he was yore man, anyhow," Hannigan stated.

Steele nodded, his lips a tight, straight line.

"That's what I figgered," he said. "Right easy to guess what put that ear-trimmin' notion into the heads of the Smoketree crowd. My guess is that this *hombre* waylaid yuh, claimin' yuh was Blue Steele. Is that it?"

Hannigan's eyes widened a little.

"That's a mighty good guess," he admitted. "Up past the line camp, he cracked down on me from behind a tree. I reckon his gun jammed on him, or something. Anyhow, I drawed and I made him drop his no-good gun. I herded him for the home ranch. And as we come near, he

bolted. He kept insistin' I was the sheriff."

"Provin' what?" John Bertram demanded.

"Proving that they're ambushed all along the trail from here on. Waitin' and watchin' for me and my ears. This *hombre* is one of Griggsy's crowd. Those reward notices was put up to decoy me toward the Smoketree, that's all," explained Blue Steele. Then he added: "And I don't figger on disappointin' 'em, not any!"

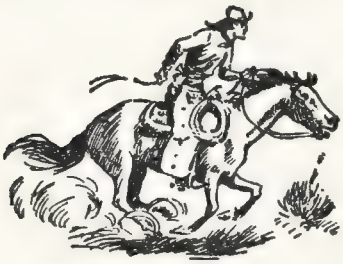
"Except," Hannigan put in drily, "yuh aim tuh keep yore ears intact, mebbe."

"Got any idear who he is, Sheriff?" Shorty asked.

Steele's eyes narrowed to thoughtful slits.

"Two-three years ago, a Los Pasos citizen name of Tom Burns got in a fight over a gal at Cabazon. The gal had a Mex admirer who was handy with a knife. He earmarked this Mister Burns."

Hannigan was exploring the dead man's pockets. He found a jackknife, some horseshoe nails, a plug of chew-



ing, a handful of .44s, a crumpled dollar bill and finally a Yuma prison visitor's card, the date rubbed away until it was indiscernible.

It was made out to: *Thomas J. Burns, Maricopa.*

"That settles it," he said, handing the card to Steele. "It links up, too, with what the judge tells me about this bein' some o' George Griggs' mischief. That mangy coyote, he'd be plottin' an' conspirin' in hell."

As they talked, Shorty had scuttled back into the ranchhouse. They were interrupted by a dismal wail. The little deputy emerged, sorrow stamped on his face, clutching something that streamed smudgy smoke as he beat it on the edge of the porch.

"Lookit, my pants! Yuh left the door open, Sheriff! It fanned the fire up an' plumb cremated my pants! Now what in—!"

"Looks like you got to stay here with the judge," Steele smiled. "You can't go draggle-tailin' all the way to the Smoketree without no pants."

"Hannigan, yuh'll lend me a extry pair, won't yuh?"

The T Bar T rider gazed solemnly at Shorty's stubby, saddle-warped legs.

He was thinking of the many times that the little deputy had locked him up in the Painted Post jail as a whooping drunk. He shook his head.

"Not me," he stated decisively.

Shorty faced Bertram desperately across the scorched ruin he clutched.

JUDGE BERTRAM ran a hand across his mouth to hide a broad smile.

"Nope," he refused. "My corduroys, they'd wrap around yuh seventeen times, little feller."

Shorty turned crestfallen and then stepped toward the doorway. In that instant, Deafy Baker, the cook appeared there. Deafy was a bent, sad-eyed man with a drooping, walrus mustache and a floursack apron.

"Come an' git it!" he announced in a loud, flat voice. He had not heard the shooting. He was unaware of the dead man out on the porch.

Shorty made a bobcat leap at the cook, who staggered back, aghast. He struggled briefly. But he lost. He sputtered to find himself rudely deprived of his floursack apron, which Shorty was knotting triumphantly around his middle.

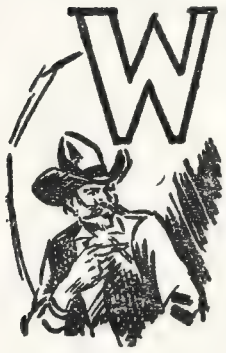
But his triumph was as brief as Deafy's struggle. Steele reached out, and firmly pried the little deputy's fingers from their hold on the floursack apron.

He took it and spread it across the dead, upturned face of Tom Burns.

"Let's go in an' eat," he said then. "There's more work like this ahead."

CHAPTER III

The High Country



WHEN the meal was finished, Steele took leave of Judge Bertram and the pantless, crestfallen Shorty.

"I'm ridin' on alone," the sheriff declared.

"That's plum foolhardy, son!" Bertram protested. "Yuh admitted yore own self these dangfool posters are just a trick to lure yuh to the Smoketree! It's a trap! The whole T Bar T should join yuh in a big cleanup, by Godfrey!"

"This here ain't a case o' law enforcement," Steele told him. "It's a personal showdown. The whole country'll laugh at this ear thing, and the law can't afford tuh be laughed at."

Steele rode away from the T Bar T with his after-dinner cigarette still dangling from his lips. And his dilapidated calfskin vest bulged with seven of Squawfoot's reward notices.

His last word to Judge Bertram and the dismal Shorty were:

"If I'm not back in three days, then you hit out. Head with the whole T Bar T outfit for the Smoketree."

He kneed the steel-dust Smith hoss into a shuffling, tireless trot and rode across the rolling range to the north until he vanished in a swale that reached down from the foothills.

Shorty, wrapped Indian-style in a blanket, turned with a troubled sigh to Bertram, there in the ranchhouse doorway.

"It's his cussed pride, Judge. Me, I'm askeered. Always when him an' me separate, bad comes of it."

"Seems plum idiotic, one man settin' forth to smoke out a entire outlaw nest," Bertram agreed. "Same time, I sort o' see his side of it. The law, it's got to be feared an' respected, not laughed at. The T Bar T could rub out the Smoketree crowd, but it couldn't rub out the laugh. Jest one man can do that—Blue Steele."

The short, winter journey of the sun found Steele in the high country by nightfall. A steep, trackless climb brought him onto a rugged range that was familiar enough to him in summer, but which was a strange and silent world now under crusted snowdrifts.

Over a sharp divide, and in the brush country beyond lay the Smoketree. Once the home of a growing spread, it was abandoned now, except by long-riders who found security in its isolation.

The snow made the going slow, but it provided Steele with certain clues as to the activities of the outlaws.

Along a frozen stream, where the drifts were criss-crossed by sign of panther and fox and banded deer, he came upon the deep hoofmarks of horses.

Within the past week, riders had journeyed frequently this way.

Steele rode on with caution, every sense alert against a surprise encounter. He kept to the cover of dense larch and pine wherever possible.

When darkness fell, he made camp under a projecting ledge, where the frozen ground was bare. Tied with the grain behind the saddle were rations prepared by the T Bar T cook. Steele dried his saddle blanket as he ate, then rolled up in it and lay down beside the fire for a few hours rest.

It was his plan to proceed under a late moon and descend that last ten miles to the Smoketree, reaching there at dawn.

But when Steele awoke, the moon was blotted out by low, rushing clouds. He stepped out from under the shelf of rock that roofed his tiny camp and felt the soft pat of snowflakes on his face.

He returned to the fire, put on fresh fuel, then sat down and worried through a smoke. This was a bad break. No moon, no night travel.

He waited till slow, murky dawn. Several fluffy inches had been added to the icy top crust of old snow. When he rode forth, the clouds broke and brilliant sunlight made a jeweled splendor of the laden trees and rocks. Its searing brightness hurt his eyes as he sent the gelding plodding through a pass to the summit.

He paused there, scanning the sweep of brush country below him. His eyes, squinted against the glare, were inflamed and his usual far-sighted vision seemed blurred.

Steele realized then that the sudden storm had placed him in a new and deadly peril. He was on the verge of snow-blindness!

All his gun-skill, his cool, audacious courage, his shrewd strategy would go for naught now. He drew his right Colt and dry-sighted at a pine trunk two rope throws away. The sights were vague and red splotches danced before his vision. He was helpless.

And then, before he could return his gun to its holster, a harsh voice rang down from a cranny in the rocks above and behind him:

"Drop it, Steele! Drop it an' reach high!"

Times without number Steele had whirled at such a command and with forking .45 lightning outspeeded another's lead. He had never met a man who could beat him to the drop and he had done this sort of thing at greater disadvantage than now. When his two Colts were snug at his hips, instead of one drawn and ready.

But he was a shorn Samson now. With an inward groan, he spread his fingers and let the Colt fall to the snow. He turned slowly in saddle as his hands slowly rose above his head. Barricaded, thirty yards up the slope, a rider crouched behind the slanted barrel of a Winchester.

The face behind it was grotesque as a death mask, the eyesockets smeared with soot. Whoever his captor was, he had wisely protected himself from snow blindness.

Keeping the gun steady on Steele, the rider kneed his mount slowly down the slope. His teeth was bared in a savage grin as he huddled at the sights, mackinaw collar turned up to his ears.

"I reckon yuh're done, Steele!" the man crowed. "I could drop yuh now, but we ain't goin' to make it as simple as that! Turn around an' shuck that other gun, careful-like! Then ride downslope, slow an' easy!"

STEELE lowered his left hand deliberately to the butt of that other Colt. He slid it slowly out of its holster.

Some men spend the better part of a lifetime calculating the odds that govern the fall of a needed card in a game of poker. Here, on the very rooftree of Indian County, with the frontier world spread in a vast view that might be his last, Steele estimated his chances against the trigger-quickness of that man behind the aimed Winchester.

Steele decided on a ten-to-one play. As the long barrel came free of the holster, he flipped the Colt backwards with a force that slammed out a report.

A horse snorted and leaped. The harsh voice, gloating a second before, rose in an agonized shriek. Steele spun the gelding around in time to see the Winchester swing down from his enemy's shoulder and belch thunderously into the snow under his mount's prancing hoofs. It dangled by a trigger finger, then fell.

His smarting eyes were still strong enough to behold the results of a freakish providence. His bullet had struck the forearm of the Winchester, grooving it deeply under the other's left hand, the lifting splinters jarring his stung grip loose.

Blue Steele was looking across the blurred sights of the Colt now, as he swung down from saddle, retrieved his own fallen gun, then he mounted again with a smooth, grace-

ful sweep of motion that left his enemy uncovered for not even a fraction of a second.

"Painted Post luck!" the disarmed man gritted.

"It ain't played out yet, neighbor," Steele said. "Squawfoot found that out. And Tom Burns, too!" He made a commanding motion with the Colt. "We're headin' for the Smoke-tree. Ride on ahead, like you so politely invited me to do."

The man studied Steele narrowly. In the sheriff's inflamed, swollen eyes he saw the signs of approaching snow blindness. But he did not know that the malady was developing so fast that distant objects were no longer visible to those granite-grey eyes.

In surly silence, Steele's captive led along an unmarked trail that plunged into a rocky chute then gave way to a timbered benchland. Steele kept the man close-crowded. His range of vision was narrowing.

Over the edge of the bench they rode, zigzagged along the face of a slide where the snowfall was already lighter and melting, and Steele was on the point of urging his captive to greater haste when from faintly ahead and below came the sound of horses. Then voices, indistinct, mingled with the horse sounds.

"Stop!" Steele ordered. "Now vamoose back to that timber on the bench! *Pronto!*"

"Losin' yore nerve, Steele?"

Fate had been overkind to this man, Steele decided. He reined close to him and smashed a fist into the smirking face.

"Tough *hombres* need tough breaking," Steele said. "Next time I'm called on to wallop yuh, it'll be with a gun. Now travel!"

With muffled curses from his blodied mouth, the outlaw sent his horse leaping back uptrail. They got back to the bench. Just beyond the rim Steele called a halt. The top of the chute was narrow, and the oncoming riders would be forced at this point to approach single file. With his shortened vision, that would give him a chance against them.

But an outcry from his captive would ruin that chance. Blue Steele whipped one of the captured squares of muslin from his vest, and thrust the wadded rag into the man's mouth, cut a thong from the other's saddle and tied the gag firmly.

The party of riders was near. Blue Steele drew his two Colts and kept his fast-blurring vision on the head of the chute. His eye-range was reduced to ten yards or so by now. Everything beyond that was a meaningless confusion of light and shadow.

The riders were nearly to the top of the chute—so close that Steele could hear the grunting pant of the horses. There were four of them, he guessed. If his eyes just held out—

The gagged outlaw suddenly put spurs into his horse and sent it leaping back into the timber, the drum of its hoofs raising a cunningly studied alarm.

Steele whirled and fired. The gagged outlaw lurched from leather and hit a tree with a thud that jarred the remaining life out of him.

STEELE sent the gelding leaping to the head of the chute. There was a clamor of hoofs and voices down there and his abrupt appearance at the rim was met with a shot that knocked his hat awry.

Then his own guns went to work, sluicing the chute with lead. He could not direct his aim with any precision. But one rider screamed and keeled to the slashing hoofs. Another dropped his gun which went clattering into the rocks. There were four of them, or had been. But behind the shambles was a fifth rider that Steele did not see. He dropped his third man and spurred from the head of the chute as the fourth, half-concealed in a rocky pocket, sent a pounding volley at him.

Steele was almost totally without vision now. His only choice was flight. He urged the gelding at a run back across the thickly timbered bench. He gave the animal its head, for he was helpless to guide it.

"It's Steele!" one of the riders screamed. "Look, he got Mitch!"

Steele heard two horses in pursuit. His only chance now rested in speed. For his sign was on the snow. He found himself longing for the staunch companionship of his resourceful and fearless little deputy.

Steele rode low, as harsh, pine-needled branches whipped blood to his cheeks. The steel-dust gelding seemed to have some uncanny animal intuition that told him of his master's helplessness. Leaping and dodging through the timber, the brave Smith hoss chose a route of safety.

Perhaps it was this care that the animal gave to the menace of the branches overhead that made it neglect its usual sure-footed caution.

Plunging through a dip, where a small stream was thinly ice-covered, the gelding sank suddenly to its withers and fell. Steele was flung into the deep drift in the opposite bank.

And when "Possum" Pitts and Giff Gillis came upon him, he was floundering waist-deep in that drift, reaching blindly out for the dangling reins of the steel-dust gelding.

They closed in on him from two sides.

"Yuh ain't enough people this time, Steele!" yelled Possum Pitts. "Put them hands high!"

CHAPTER IV

Ace Between Kings

THE storm that overtook Steele in the high country did not reach down onto the T Bar T home spread. But the nearness of it sent the temperature tumbling. A stud game was started on the long table in the ranch-house kitchen. Shorty sat in it but Bertram did not. He merely looked on.

Luck was running for the little deputy. Early in the game, with a king and ace showing, he won by turning over his king hole-card. A few hands later, with another king in the hole, the ace of diamonds to its back, and the spade king showing, Shorty collected another pot.

"By Godfrey, it looks like yuh're thimble-riggin' my outfit!" Bertram exclaimed, his eyes crinkling good-humoredly as he spoke. "That's the second time yuh held a red ace between black kings!"

"Yeah," Shorty said vacantly as he raked in his winnings. "Jackpot Jordan learnt me how."

They played for a half hour more. Again Shorty had ace-king showing. Hannigan bet into it.

"That set-up won't repeat," he declared. "It's a thousand to one it can't."

Deafy, the cook, stayed for three raises, then gloomily turned down his cards. Hannigan called and turned up a hole jack to make a pair. Shorty turned over a club king. It was back to back with the red ace and the spade king his third card. Deafy got up. He was a superstitious man.

"It's a omen," he declared in his loud, flat voice. "The spirits are talkin' through the cards an' I don't crave tuh git dragged into it!"

Shorty shot a startled glance at Bertram.

"What yuh think, Judge? Reckon Deafy's correct?"

"Yuh're just tryin' to steer our suspicions onto a blind trail," chuckled Bertram.

"It's a omen o' trouble, all right enough!" Deafy insisted. "Once in Senora I seen a old *veija* who could read the cards. A ace surrounded by a pair, it was that time. Next day we found out one o' our *vaqueros* was captured by two bandits an' hamstrung."

Shorty scrambled up from the bench so abruptly that he spilled part of his stack onto the floor. There was dark excitement in his blue eyes.

"It means the sheriff!" he exploded. "The Smoketree crowd got him!"

He impulsively pushed his chips to the middle of the table. His foreboding became grim determination.

"Lookit here, Judge!" he cried. "I'm headin' after the sheriff, here an' now! Things like this happen for a purpose, that's what I think!"

"Don't go off half-cocked!" scoffed Bertram. "He said wait three days an' then—" But there was worry in his eyes, too.

"I say to hell with what Steele ordered," spoke up Hannigan. "Me, I figger we got a yell comin' our own selves over that nest o' sidewinders at the Smoketree! Come spring when we put T Bar T cows back in the high country, they'll be preyin' on the brand! Sooner or later the Smoketree's got to be cleaned out! Now's the time!"

"Then I ain't ridin' alone, is that it?" asked Shorty, his eyes on Bertram.

The judge growled uncomfortably. The way it was turning out, it looked like his own outfit was backing him down. His riders were willing to face the hazards of outlaw lead against his say-so. He gave in.

"All right, dang-blast it!" he decided.

Shorty Watts uttered a whoop and charged out of the ranchhouse, making for the cavvy corral. He had pants now—a pair that Elko Keeth, one of the T Bar T riders had dug up out of his war-bag.

The T Bar T men followed the little deputy. Soon all hands were clamping cold saddles onto their best mounts, Judge Bertram among them.

Within an hour after Steele's capture by the outlaw pair, a nine-man posse lit out for the high country. Deafy Baker was left in sole charge of the home spread.

Had Steele been aware of developments down there on the desert side, he might have found his capture more endurable.

Possum Pitts, sleepy-eyed, slovenly and foul-mouthed, was in favor of instant action. He leveled one of Steele's own guns.

"Leave his carcass here for the coyotes, that's my notion!" he declared.

Giff Gillis knocked down the aiming hand.

"Don't rush things!" he demanded. "He gunned Mitch, an' he's got to pay fer it!"

"Yuh aim to herd him all the way back to the Smoketree? It's a waste o' energy, I say! Heaps easier to lug just his ears!"

"How'll the rest o' the crowd know it's Steele's ears?"

"His star an' his guns. That ought to convince the boys. An' Griggsy, he'll pay the thousand or wish to hell he had!"

Steele listened in silent scorn.

WITH seeming reluctance, Giff Gillis said:

"Mebbe yuh're right. Besides, Steele is slipperier'n a greased eel. Plenty safer tuh settle it now."

They were beside the stream where Steele had fallen. Possum had taken his two Colts. Gillis had the gelding's knotted reins, his arm looped through them.

"Reckon we better shoot the hoss, too," he remarked. "Though I plumb hate tuh do it."

Steele could endure their taunts so long as he alone was concerned. But he prized the steel-dust gelding as he would a human friend. The talk of killing the faithful animal aroused him to cold fury.

"Yuh're lower'n a sidewinder's belt buckle, you two!" He bit off the words and spat them past flattened lips. "Yuh harm that hoss, and I'll haunt yuh for it!"

"I tell yuh, we got tuh finish this hellion here an' now!" Gillis cried. In that dismal, winter-bound silence, the sheriff's malediction filled him with foreboding. He drew back the hammer of the aimed Colt. It clicked ominously.

The steel-dust gelding lowered its head to the spot where the cave-in of ice and snow had bared the trickling flow of the little creek. Steele heard its muzzle touch the water.

He gambled once again with a de-

cision as swift as the flash of a cartridge primer. With a startling shout, he leaped with a splash into the water. The gelding jerked up its head, snorted and reared. Giff Gillis, taken by surprise, had his arm nearly jerked from its socket. He was thrown sprawling into the snow.

Then Steele dived for Possum's legs as the Colt roared and a slug ripped the back of his calfskin vest.

His head struck Possum at the waistline and the outlaw was thrust deep into the drift. Steele felt the stab of the clasp knife in his forearm. He got Possum's wrist. With strength made tenfold by desperation, Steel twisted.

Possum had the breath jolted out of him and was smothered in the snow. He lost the knife to Steele. Stabbing blindly, Steele sank the blade in the hollow of the outlaw's throat. A gurgling death scream, and Possum's life blood crimsoned the drift that half covered him.

Steele's hand found his Colt, and he struggled erect as Gillis rushed down on him. He fired twice, his aim guided by his sense of sound, acute as a wild creature's in this fantastic encounter.

Giff uttered a wordless croak and his full weight struck Steele, the two of them tumbling onto the wheezing Possum. Giff was only wounded. He grappled with Steele. Down the creek bank they slid into the icy water.

In the rolling drop, Steele lost his hold of Giff. He staggered up, clutching his Colt, his pounding ears again prodding out for a target.

Giff had perceived the sheriff's blindness. He was sitting now in the edge of the creek, enduring the numbing cold, for his life depended in betraying no slightest sound or movement. He saw his own gun a few feet away, the butt barely showing in the snow. He began a stealthy move toward it, like a snake sluggish with cold. Steele, a crouched statue of defiance, stood near, waiting, listening, every nerve tense.

Giff's hand touched the butt of the snow-covered six-gun. He raised it, aimed up at Steele's breast. The sheriff was hardly ten feet from the muzzle. For a long time death had been piling up odds against him and now the wintry wilderness of the high country had robbed him of the keen sight that was his greatest protection.

Golden shadows slanted over the snow. The tapering pines were candles at this majestic altar of the outdoors and the melting snow dribbled from them like slow tallow.

Giff squeezed the trigger, his teeth set in vicious satisfaction. The six-gun jolted out of his hand with a great, blasting noise.

As if by a miracle, Steele stood unhit. The six-gun barrel had been tightly choked with snow. The cylinder burst; exploding hunks of metals whizzed in a wide arc around him. But the bullet that was to have brought the sheriff's earthly career to a close was stuck tight in that demolished six-gun.

Giff came up dripping out of the stream. His legs had hardly straightened under him when Steele's Colt roared and Giff went down again with a splash. He lay still, no longer suffering from the icy caress of the water.

Staggering and stumbling, Steele began a circling search for his scattered belongings. And for the reins of the steel-dust gelding.

CHAPTER V

The Back Trail

IT was up to the Smith hoss now. Steele's life depended on its instinct. He sat in the saddle, binding his knife-slashed forearm with another of Squawfoot's posters, and gave the animal its head.

The gelding went steadily on. Steele, although his eyelids were swollen, could tell that the sun was on his

right shoulder. That meant he was headed in a general southerly direction. Slow hours of this going, and the sunlight faded even in the barren open. For now the long shadows of the peaks were on the snow.

And then the gelding's hoofs groped in a rock slide, in a sharp descent that informed Steele that they were traveling back toward the T Bar T.

"Yuh're bossin' this expedition from now on, Smithy. And yuh're doin' a mighty fine job so far. Just keep it up," he whispered, softly.

He felt the horse's neck stiffen and raise under his touch. The gelding whinnied softly, its head turned to the left.

Steele was gripped with helpless dread. Here he was, a bold, stark target, the dark mount under him patterned against the snow. And someone was near. Perilously near. Was there light enough for searching eyes to find him, for a good aim to knock him down into that rubble of rock?

He sat rigid, not daring the slightest movement, his ears straining in the wilderness silence. And then came the sound of riders, somewhere off to the left. He slid from saddle and took the reins, one hand groping out in front of him as he stumbled for some cover which he hoped was near.

He skirted a sheer precipice, swayed back. His hand brushed a rough-leafed thicket of manzanita, horse-high and dense. He crouched and pulled the gelding after him.

He squatted there as the horse sounds neared, passed, and then faded in the distance beyond. He emerged from the thicket, remounted, and rode on down the slope.

He did not know that the riders who climbed past, within hailing distance of the thicket, were his would-be rescuers from the T Bar T. All sounds were enemy sounds after his grueling experiences of recent hours.

The wilderness was silent again as the steel-dust gelding continued its descent until its hoofs sounded sharp and clear on the rocks, and Steele knew that they were out of the snow.

It was night now. For the absence of light brought relief to his aching, burning eyes. The rugged miles slowly stretched out behind, and late in the night, when Steele was drowsing in saddle, he was aroused by the gelding coming to a complete halt. He pressed his heels lightly to its sides. The gelding did not move. Steele stirruped to the ground and again felt his way, step by step forward until he touched a gate.

He knew then that he was near the T Bar T homespread. He opened the gate, led the gelding through, closed the gate again and in a few minutes more smelled pleasant wood smoke.

Steele raised a shout. He waited, but no answer came. He shouted again, louder. He stripped the gear from the tired gelding, turned it into the cavvy corral and trudged toward the ranchhouse.

"The judge an' his lazy cowpokes must o' holed up for the winter, like squirrels!" he grunted. "I sure never seen a outfit so hard to wake up!"

HE touched the side of the house, found the door, and beat on it with the flat of a hand before opening it and stepping inside.

"Hi, folks! Pry yoreselves up out o' yore dreams!" he sang out. His voice sounded through the house, answered by its own echoes. The warmth of a low fire on the hearth felt good on his face. He advanced toward it, fumbled for firelogs, tossed several on, then squatted in front of the blaze, thawing himself out.

The warmth made him drowsy. He pulled the sofa in front of the fire and stretched out. Soon he was asleep. He sprang suddenly awake. Someone had touched him on the shoulder.

Then he heard Deafy's flat voice.

"Holy horn toads! Where at *you* come from?"

Steele swung his feet to the floor. He started to shout a demand for news, but the effort was futile. Even

as he shouted, the deaf cook broke in with another question:

"The outfit, where at are they? What happened tuh yore eyes?"

Steele grabbed the cook by the sleeve, tugged him into the kitchen, stumbled over a bench, and threw back the oilcloth cover from the long table.

He pulled a stubby pencil from his pocket and scrawled:

"What happened? Shorty? Bertram?"

He heard Deafy give a ponderous sigh.

"Tain't no use, Steele! Hell, I can't read!"

FOUR men were left at the Smoketree. Suspense bit deep into their ruthless souls. A round dozen had inhabited the tumbledown adobe only a few days before.

"A week since Squawfoot showed up!" snarled Utah Johnny. "Tom Burns lights out next! Then Rumford! And this mawnin' Giff an' Possum with them *hombres* Griggsy sent, they go for a look-see! And not a damn man comes back! What's it mean?"

"It means they got Steele an' aim to collect the thousan' from Griggsy on their own, that's what it means!" whined another, called Baldy.

The swarthy man who was restlessly pacing the floor halted and turned.

"Mebbe they got Steele," he said. "Also, mebbe Steele got them, *quien sabe?*"

Utah Johnny rasped a laugh.

"I never seen no one man who could tromp down eight, Rubio."

"You have not seen this Steele," Slash Rubio patiently explained for the fortieth time. "He shoot like the devil! Once when I work for Don Pedro Robles—"

"Aw, I'm sick o' this bellerin'!" broke in the small, oldish man called Baldy. "Let's do sumthin'!"

"Do what?" rasped Utah Johnny irritably.

"Ride, by Harry! Find out what's gone haywire!"

"But soon she iss dark. Tomorrow, *mañana*, then we decide!"

"I'm decidin' now!" shrilled Baldy.

"Me, too!" declared Utah Johnny. "Yuh comin', Rip?" he snapped at a fourth man who had been at the door, watching toward the mountains.

Rip Sawday spat angrily.

"Damn right! We're clean out o' grub! I don't figger on starvin' no longer."

Soon the four of them were riding for the mountains. It was almost dark when they came upon riderless horses, straggling back toward the Smoketree. A little later, at the head of the chute where it gave onto the pine flats, they stumbled upon Steele's gun-toll. Three men, stiffened in death.

When they reached the bench above, they found the dead, gagged Rumford. Cutting away the gag, they were awed to find that muslin square they had seen Squawfoot painstakingly scrawl.

"You see, *amigos*, Steele rides," said Flash Rubio. "Eet is better that we turn back."

"Yuh're not sneakin' out on us at this stage o' proceedin's," Sawday told him. "It'll be moon-up later on. And yuh're a trailer, Mex, even if yuh got a chicken heart. Yuh can foller Steele's sign in the snow. An' when we catch up, I'm collectin' me a thousan' bucks worth o' ears!"

"I'm with yuh on that," declared Utah Johnny.

There, within a few yards of their dead comrades, they built a fire and waited until the moon rose. As Rip Sawday had remarked, Slash Rubio was a skilled hand on trailing. The steel-dust gelding's tracks were plain in the pale, cold light.

The four rode on. Driven by hate and hunger they made greater speed than Steele had, in his blind ride.

In a meadow beyond the summit they glimpsed a campfire. Slash Rubio was sent to make reconnaissance while the others waited. He returned soon with news that was perplexing.

"Eet is not Steele!" he whispered.

"Eet is the whole T Bar T! Bertram himself, also Steele's *segundo*, the little redhead! I hear them make talk of the Smoketree! *Por Dios*, eet is bad!"

Rip Sawday was grinning savagely.

"The hull damn T Bar T, yuh say?"

"*Si!* Do I not remember them? When I work that time for Don Pedro—"

"Then it ain't bad news, it's good!" Rip Sawday chuckled evilly. "We can crack down on Bertram's home spread an' eat again!"

Utah Johnny snickered.

"A damn good play, I say! Bertram an' his outfit ride to clean us out! When they git back, they'll find we cleaned *them* out, huh?"

"Also, don't forget Steele!" put in Baldy. "He must be hittin' for the T Bar T, his own self!"

"Git goin', Rubio!" ordered Sawday.

Again they took to the trail of the lone sheriff. They dipped down from the high country, passed below the snowline, and when daylight stole over the lower range, they were nearing the ranch where Steele and Deafy, the cook, kept their strange vigil.

The four renegades approached the ranchhouse warily. At the lower gate they halted. Rip Sawday said:

"RUBIO, go make a look-see. Signal if all's clear."

The other protested fearfully.

"Ah, but no! Eet may be a trap?"

"Yuh said the hull T Bar T was up there on the prod, didn't yuh? Well, if yuh lied it's yore own funeral, savvy? Git a move on, Mex, or I'll work yuh over with this gun butt!"

Rip Sawday had taken command of the dwindling Smoketree crowd, and his domination was complete now. Again Rubio reconnoitered and presently from the front of the ranchhouse he waved a come-on signal to his companions.

Steele was asleep by the fireplace when men's spurs jingled in the ranchyard. His eyes were covered with a poultice made of tea leaves. Deafy was busy at the kitchen stove when Rip Sawday strode in and poked a gun in his back.

Deafy turned. He gave a gasp.

"Not a word or I shoot yuh full o' holes!" growled Sawday.

"Don't plug him or we got to do our own cookin'!" spoke up Baldy.

Utah Johnny, followed by Rubio, were making for the doorway that led into the room with the fireplace. The room where Steele lay outstretched on the sofa.

Steele had heard the spur-jingle outside and it had instantly wakened him. It was the returning outfit, he thought, until he heard Rip Sawday's rough command to Deafy.

It was well that he had chosen to nap with his guns on. He turned over, drew both Colts, and aimed them across the head of the sofa toward the kitchen door. His sense of location was certain.

Utah Johnny made the door and was promptly greeted by a jarring report that flung him back on his heels. He rocked there an instant, then sagged down as a second shot tumbled Slash Rubio on a bench, where he slowly crumpled. Rip Sawday took a quick step away from Deafy, then halted in a second of uncertainty, then turned back.

In that second Deafy lifted a skilletful of sizzling, frying potatoes. He slapped the greasy contents squarely into Sawday's face.

There are few things as hot as cooking potatoes, and Sawday's discovery of that fact was noted by an anguished scream. Deafy raised the skillet and as Sawday clawed at his tormented face, the cook banged the outlaw solidly over the head. Sawday went down with a crash.

Baldy leaped for the outer door. The contents of a steaming pot of coffee caught him in the small of the back and drenched him to the knees as he went. He shrieked once, and when he sprang onto his horse he raced off stiff-legged in the stirrups.

(Concluded on page 91)

He Hated Sidewinders Worse than Pizen—and His Six-Guns Roared to Protect an Innocent Hombre!

He stood in the doorway, with his gun steady

The MAN GETTER

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Author of "The Gila River Man," "Bullets Are Trumps," etc.

CLARK sat all afternoon on the crest of a little hillock that gave him a sight of the adobe shack and yet afforded concealment for himself and his horse behind a clump of scrub oak. At last a man came riding up to the shack from the range back of it, unsaddled and watered his animal and turned it into the corral. Then the man went into the house.

Half an hour later Clark was still watching the place.

The sun set with a suddenness that seemed to wipe out the cool peace of the rolling prairie and bathe it with an ominous blackness. Then from the cabin came a yellow gleam of light, like a peering, watchful eye trying to penetrate the night. When the light came on, Clark got to his feet, took the gun holster off the saddle horn where he had hung it, and strapped it on. Then he walked down to the shack.

He looked into the lighted window and saw a tall youth stooped over a bench, washing himself over a granite basin. The youth was stripped to the waist, and his shirt and gun hung on pegs on the opposite wall.

Clark went quickly around and

kicked the door open with his boot, then stood in the doorway with his gun steady. The lone occupant of the cabin turned in surprise and wiped the water off his face. When he saw the gun covering him, he glanced quickly at his own weapon, measured the chances of reaching it, then shrugged and looked back at Clark.

"Redding?" Clark said questioningly.

"That's what they call me," the other nodded.

Without haste, Clark moved over to the wall and lifted the gun out of its holster, stuck it in his own belt. He nodded to a chair, but the youth did not sit down.

"They call yuh Redding 'round here," Clark said evenly. "They called yuh Parkhurst down in San Saba, didn't they?"

The youth's tan cheeks flushed, and his eyes cast about quickly, frantically. Then his face was expressionless, and he watched his captor without answering.

"Yuh're Parkhurst, wanted fer murder in San Saba. Yuh shot a rancher in the back when he caught yuh in the act o' stealin' one of his hosses."

"That's a damned lie," the youth returned heatedly. But the spark seemed to die, and he stopped irresolutely.

"And," Clark continued, "yuh broke jail. If yuh'd been innocent—"

"I wouldn't 'a' had a chanct. That shootin' was planted on me by—"

Clark interrupted. "If it was, yuh could 'a' proved it. I'm afraid yuh're gonna have to put on yore shirt and go back with me. Mebbe yuh'll git another chanct to prove yuh was framed."

There was no pleading in the young man's answer when he said: "That's jest the point—I couldn't do that. I got a idea the proof lies around here. That's why I'm here—that an' the idea that I could start life over again. Yore findin' me an' takin' me back without a chanct to clear myself is an example o' what I meant when I said I didn't have a chanct. I had a feelin' all along that you was the man they'd send after me. I shoulda knowed—"

"Yuh know who I am?" Clark asked.

"Shore. Who don't? An' I know yore reputation. 'Man Getter' Clark, pride o' the Rangers. Yuh never give up the trail, an' yuh hate a man that's got crossways o' the law worse'n a man hates a snake. You would go without yore breakfast for a week just for the pleasure o' seein' 'em hang a man yuh brought in. Yuh're one o' them blood-drinkers, a killer at heart, who jest happens to be able to satisfy his killer instinct an' still stay on the side o' the law.

"I'll go with yuh. though. Ain't no use, it seems, to try to git along doin' right. You might's well eat the rest o' that grub 'fore we start. I won't need any more around here."

CLARK'S face was immobile. He could have been thirty or he could have been forty years old. His eyes were grave as he thanked his prisoner for the invitation. He poured coffee and ate in silence while the youth got his shirt on, but his gun was not far from his hand at all times.

Then there came a sudden interruption. A rifle barrel poked its black nose through the window and at the same moment the door burst open.

A hard-bitten, lean *hombre* stood in the doorway; and the upper part of another man, the one with the rifle, leaned in through the window. The man in the doorway had a gun covering both Clark and the youth.

"Howdy, Redding," the intruder said. There was mock courtesy in his voice. "Got comp'ny, I see."

The youth looked at him with unpleasant recognition.

"Friend o' mine," he said, then waited for the other to state his business. Clark leaned back in his chair and his cold face did not change expression.

"Friend, eh? 'Nother hoss-thief? That's good." The man's grin was ugly and derisive as he beckoned to his companion at the window. "Come on in, Pedro. Jest a friendly little bunch o' hoss-thieves." He turned his attention to Clark, surveyed him up and down, then asked interestedly, "Yuh had lots of experience with a long loop?"

Clark took a mouthful of beans and washed them down with coffee.

"About twenty years," he answered, then went on with his eating.

THE intruder grunted, then turned back to the youth.

"Reckon we kin talk business before him, eh?"

"Suits me, Gregg. I told yuh the answer a dozen times already, though."

"I think mebbe yuh'll change yore mind this time," Gregg said. "Think about the things that's come up recent. A rancher up the way jest missed a dozen young hosses that he finished breakin' only last week. Signs point that they were drove here to yore place an' probably disappeared out the back o' yore land over that malpais which don't ever leave no tracks. Since yuh're gonna git the blame, why don't yuh come through an' let us drive stuff through that way all the time? Yuh'd git a cut—an' in that case there wouldn't be no tracks pointin' to yuh."

"I told yuh before that I wasn't gonna do that," Redding snapped. "No matter how much yuh offered me."

Gregg's face went black for a moment; then he tried a different tack. Turning to Clark, he said, "As an expert hoss-thief, wouldn't yuh say Redding was a fool?"

"As an expert," Clark answered, "I'd say he was a fool in some ways. But then again, s'pose he was already in sech a spot that he couldn't take the chanct on jest this kind o' job. I knew him before, and I know that he's got a-plenty hangin' over his head already. He might be wantin' to tread kinda soft till that blows over. Mebbe in a few years things'll be different."

The man called Gregg was impatient. "We ain't got no few years to wait. An' things won't be no better back where he come from. I tol' him that. I was down there in San Saba when he got in a jam. I even know who done it, an' so I know he can't git himself out no matter how long he waits. That was taken care of proper—"

"I know it was," Clark said evenly. "I was around. The rancher he was accused o' killin' was shot with a bullet out of a thirty-eight on a forty-four frame—"

"Forty-five frame," Gregg corrected.

"Yeah, forty-five frame," Clark continued. "An' they ain't been any but Redding's gun built that way they could find in the county—"

"Yeah, that's the thing that's got Redding whipped," Gregg said with a grin. "An' he can't beat that evidence ag'in him."

"There's one way he could beat it," Clark said, "and I figure it might work. That is, to find the man with the thirty-eight on a forty-four—"

"On a forty-five frame," Gregg interrupted. "How come yuh're so bent on sayin' it was a forty-four frame?" He looked at Clark suspiciously.

"I happened to be pretty close to the case," Clark answered. "From beginnin' to end."

"I don't remember yuh—don't b'lieve I got yore name."

"The name's Clark," answered the man at the table.

Gregg froze in his tracks and his face underwent a transformation. That name was known to every man who ever stole a cow or killed a man within a radius of five hundred miles. The man Pedro at the window stiffened and his hand tightened on his rifle.

"The Man Gitter," Gregg mumbled as he realized the trap he had fallen into. His eyes glazed and he turned to Redding. "So yuh led me into a deadfall—" His hand streaked to

his hip and his gun darted up, nose toward the unarmed youth.

A shot roared—and another. Gregg looked startled. His smoking gun arced downward in a weary hand. He clutched his middle with his left hand and leaned against the wall. Then his knees gave way and he slid to the floor, dead.

But while his leader was dying—before he hit the floor—the Mexican half-breed, Pedro, tried to raise the muzzle of the rifle and fire from the hip. Clark's gun barked the second time from beside the table, and Pedro's scream filled the room. His shoulder was shattered, and he fell.

CLARK crossed the room and picked up the gun in the dead Gregg's hand. "Colt thirty-eight on a forty-four frame," he said, more to himself than to the youth, who still sat in his chair unarmed.

From his waist the Ranger removed Redding's weapon, and laid it on the table. Then he stuck the dead man's gun where the other one had been.

"I was lookin' fer the man who killed that rancher back in San Saba," he said slowly. "They thought a feller named Parkhurst did it, but I'm convinced I've jest killed the real murderer. The wounded Mexican will prob'ly come through with the truth 'fore I git through with him. I'll be gittin' on with the prisoner and the dead man. And thanks fer the supper—*Redding*. I won't be lookin' fer Parkhurst any more.

"Yuh see, there seems to be a little kink in my reputation. It ain't that I hate people that git crossways with the law like I hate rattlesnakes. It's that I do hate worse'n a rattlesnake a man who, 'stead o' workin' and tryin' to build up somethin' fer himself — like yuh're doin' — who 'stead o' that, waits fer the other man to git somethin' and then shoots him in the back and takes it away.

"A man deserves what he earns—if he earns a living he deserves to live; if he kills to steal another man's earnings, he deserves to die. It's not law that people like; it's the right to live in peace, and to enjoy what they earn. The next time yuh start to doubt that, think a long time first, then yuh'll understand."

Clark picked up his hat and went out, whistling for his horse. Redding lent him a pack animal to take his two prisoners to the local jail and morgue.

And, once more, the Man Getter who would rather see a man hanged than eat, had added a notch to his gun; and people knew better than ever that he was a law officer because he loved to kill.

But a young rancher who called himself Redding listened to their tales and held his tongue.

Painted Post Killers

(Concluded from page 87)

Steele ripped the poultice from his eyes. The tea leaves had worked quick wonders. His snow blindness was no longer complete. He could see well enough to rush outside.

His twin Colts banged a death duet and when Baldy's horse tore past the cavvy corral, it was riderless. Halfway between house and corral, Baldy was hunched over, forehead in the dust, his attitude a grotesque semblance of a man at prayer. He tried to lift a gun, but he toppled over with the effort. Then he lay still, face up.

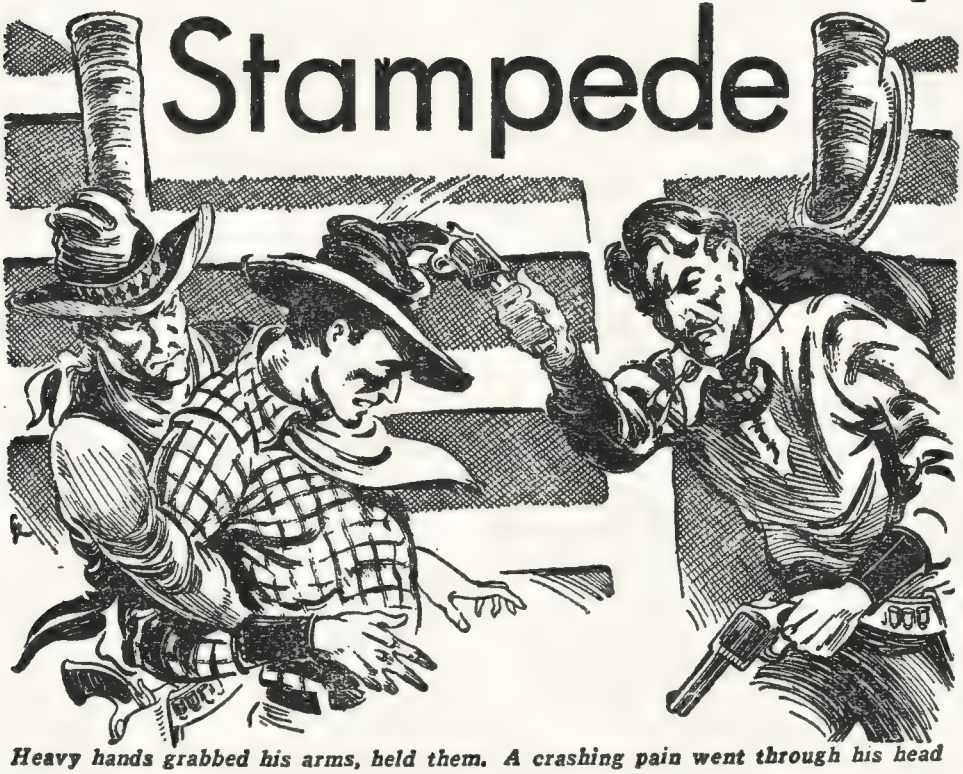
The Smoketree crowd was no more.

Steele went back to the kitchen doorstep and sat down. The sun was warm now and the wind had died. It was good to see again.

He reached into a pocket of his worn calfskin vest, ripped one of the muslin reward notices into small pieces, and when Deafy plucked up courage to peer from the house, he saw the sheriff of Painted Post calmly cleaning his guns.

The law still reigned in Indian County.

The Bad Penny Stampede



Heavy hands grabbed his arms, held them. A crashing pain went through his head

Milling Cattle, Running Wild on the Cowtown Streets, Help a Fighting Ranny as He Makes a Play to Bust Up a Crooked Deal!

By VICTOR KAUFMAN

Author of "Blood Money," "Monkey Deputy," etc.

"SLEEPY" McCANN stiffened, the echoes of that shot ringing in his ears. A sharp dread stabbed through him. His pinto shied nervously. Echoes rumbled, merging with the restless moan of the desert wind. A split second passed.

Then it came!

The most feared sound of the cattle drive. The thunder of maddened, frightened hoofs, surging to a roar. The crack of horns. The wild, helpless cursing of the night riders.

"Stampede!"

Sleepy hissed the word through tightly clenched teeth. He had been cinching up, preparing to take his turn with the herd. Now he jerked the cinch tight. Whirling, he shouted:

"Stampede! Hit leather, everybody! Stampede!"

Dark forms snapped from the

ground. Triangle-10 buckaroos came out of their blankets, rushed madly for horses. "Dad" Sandstrom, who owned that scattering herd, cursed as he stumbled past Sleepy and scrambled for the saddle string.

Sleepy made the saddle in one leap. Laying his reins hard against the pinto's neck, he cut sharply around. Sight was almost impossible in the moonless dark, but Sleepy's ears guided him. He raked hard with his spurs. The little horse snorted, shot forward. Ghostlike, Sleepy sent the pinto leveling out over the sage.

"It's come!" Sleepy cursed into the wind. "I knew it would. Gus Rattick's behind this, shore as shootin'! He's tryin' to ruin Dad—all because o' that mortgage!"

THE whole thing was clear to Sleepy. Someone—hired by Gus Rattick—had crept close to the herd, fired that shot. Rattick, the shotgun banker, held a mortgage on Dad Sandstrom's ranch. It was toward the little cowtown that the herd had been headed. A buyer waited there. And the money Dad Sandstrom would receive was to pay off that mortgage. But now—

"Gotta stop 'em!" Sleepy muttered. "If Dad loses that ranch now, he's ruined!"

Sleepy squinted into the darkness. Straight ahead he caught sight of the plunging mass of maddened cattle. On they swept, like shadows before his eyes. Then Sleepy stiffened. The herd was running west! West—straight toward the brink of Cougar Canyon!

Wildly the young cowboy raked with his spurs. He whipped off his *sombrero*, fanned the pinto's flanks. If he could just get abreast of the leaders!

Off in the darkness a gun cracked. Dimly, Sleepy caught sight of frantic riders, fighting the tide of crazed cattle. But there were only three out there. The rest couldn't have gotten into the saddle so quick. Just three—and Sleepy.

"Run! Run, little hoss! Run like hell!" Sleepy groaned the words in a hopeless whisper. The pinto seemed to understand. Its breath sobbed and whistled with the agony of effort. Dark earth swept under its flying hoofs. Faster — faster!

Suddenly a hoarse, thankful curse broke from Sleepy's lips. Off to the side he saw the head of that surging mass. With a twitch of reins Sleepy pulled his horse close to the herd. Spurring, he gained a few yards. Then he twisted sideways and pulled his gun.

He was abreast of the leaders!

Sleepy's finger flexed on the trigger. Once—twice. The shots cracked futilely against the chaos of the stampede. Sleepy groaned in helpless fury. He lashed his horse on. Ages seemed to slip by. Slowly—but surely—he pulled into the lead.

Now!

Wild surging recklessness flamed in the cowboy's veins. One chance in a thousand: those were his odds. But Sleepy gambled. He cut to the left. Straight across the path of those plunging hoofs he rode. His six-gun belched flame. Again and again it cracked. Lead fanned into the mass of crazed bodies.

But it was like throwing water at a volcano. Sleepy cursed. He shot again. Then the hammer clicked on empty shells.

With maddened speed, Sleepy's fingers ripped at his gun belt. Seconds seemed like hours. The herd thundered on. Ahead, somewhere in the darkness, was the canyon brink. A thousand-foot trap. Ruin and death, waiting—

"Gotta turn 'em!" Sleepy clicked shells into his gun. A curse gurgled from his lips as he twisted, reined hard to the right. Back across the face of the herd he went, cutting close to the leaders.

Crack! His gun spat flame. One steer plunged down, was swallowed as the herd swept over it. Sleepy fired again. He waved his *sombrero*, yelled madly.

The leaders swerved a trifle. Sleepy shouted again, his breath rasping a throat tortured by labored gasps. The herd swerved still more.

Then a dark form loomed in the night, and someone shouted. Another rider pounded up. Even as Sleepy called to them, a swift, silent thankfulness went through him. For he saw the herd turn, surge sideways into a tangled mill. The riders hugged close to the mass, shouting and swearing. The herd continued to rumble. But it ran in a circle now. The danger was past.

Sleepy relaxed weakly. Slowly he twirled a cigarette, sucked in a lungful of smoke.

A rider trotted close. "That you, Sleepy?"

Sleepy exhaled in sharp relief. "Yeah. It's me, Dad."

Old Man Sandstrom shook his head. "Yuh did a fine job, stoppin' 'em alone, kid."

Sleepy shrugged. "Another mile an' the whole herd would a' been in the canyon. Had to stop 'em."

"Was one o' them gangs started it," Dad Sandstrom muttered angrily. "Rustlers, tryin' to cut out a few head. I'd like to lay hands on—"

Sleepy cursed softly. "Dad, how long yuh gonna be so blind? Yuh know who started that stampede. Gus Rattick did! That lousy money-wrangler hired someone to spook our herd. He's—"

"What?" Dad Sandstrom laughed. "Don't be loco! Gus Rattick ain't that ornery. I know yuh hate 'im, Sleepy, but he's all right. Little sharp in business, mebbe. But he'd never do a thing like that. Why, hell, this herd'll pay the mortgage. Gus'd only be cuttin' off his nose to spite his face!"

Sleepy shrugged wearily. For months he had argued the question. It was no use. But Sleepy himself was sure that Rattick wanted the Triangle-10, not the money. And if Dad Sandstrom failed to pay off the mortgage, the ranch would go to the banker.

"Dad's gittin' childish," Sleepy muttered to himself, watching the old rancher ride back toward the lowing herd. "Gus has him buffaloed. An' this is only the first try. Gus'll have more orneriness up his sleeve. Reckon I'll hafta watch things closer from now on."

IT was the next evening. Sleepy balanced on the top rail of the railroad loading pens and squinted down Shotgun's dusty "main street" with drowsy eyes. A few lights blinked into the twilight and a scattering of men lounged along the drab sidewalks. The scene before him was peaceful, but Sleepy was nervous.

Dad Sandstrom talked with two men over by the corral gate. One was Max Hanlon, cattle buyer. The other, a stocky man in black "town clothes," was Gus Rattick the banker.

"Crooked as a broken cow's tail!" Sleepy grunted. "But what the heck? The herd's delivered. Why should I be spooky now?"

He twirled a cigarette, struck a match. Then he jumped from the railing and strolled toward the three men. The voice of Hanlon became audible above the nervous rumble of the penned cattle.

"We'll close the deal right after supper. I got the money up at Rattick's bank."

Dad Sandstrom nodded. "Shore. We'll meet there, huh? Then I can pay Gus the money I owe him, soon as you pay me."

Sleepy watched the banker's heavy jaws chew a black cigar.

"Suits me," Rattick rumbled. "We'll meet—say 'bout ten o'clock."

"That late?" Hanlon seemed surprised.

"Can't make it before," Gus Rattick grunted. "Got business to 'tend to first."

Dad Sandstrom laughed. "Why worry? I'd be willing to stay up all night to git that mortgage lifted!"

"That wouldn't do—" Gus Rattick seemed to smile. Yore payment is due at midnight."

"I'll shore pay it!" Dad Sandstrom chuckled. "An' I reckon yuh'll be plenty glad, eh, Gus?"

Gus Rattick's eyes gleamed strangely. "Shore will. I'm not anxious to have a ranch on my hands."

Sleepy grunted at this. "That

ranch"—he spoke loud enough for the others to hear—"is worth a heap more'n the mortgage!"

Gus Rattick whipped around on his heel, his eyes narrowing. Sleepy stared hard at him, searching for some expression that would cinch his fears. But Rattick looked angry—that was all.

Dad Sandstrom glanced up, annoyed. "You still here? What th' hell! Why not celebrate some?"

Sleepy grunted. "Me? Nothin' doin'!" He looked straight at the banker. "I'm gonna stick right here."

Dad Sandstrom laughed. "Still spooky! Can yuh beat that? Gus, this young ramrod o' mine figgers yuh're tryin' to steal the ranch. Imagine! Says yuh don't aim to let me pay off that mortgage!" Dad chuckled.

Gus Rattick's lips drew back, smiling thinly. "Why should I want that? Hell! It's the money I'm after. Damned glad yuh made the drive all right." But his eyes bored into Sleepy's for a dark instant before he turned away. "See you at ten, Sandstrom," he muttered. "Come on, Hanlon. I'll show yuh a good place to eat."

When the two were gone, Dad turned to Sleepy. "Yuh crazy idjit! G'wan an' have a good time! Yuh're only young oncet an' yuh're not in town often. Jest quit worryin'. Everythin's gonna be all right. Rattick wants that money bad. The ranch means nothin' to him."

Sleepy shrugged. "Mebbe. But I still figger Gus is after the longest gain. In this case, it happens to be the Triangle-10. He'll not give up—"

"Ferget it!" Dad Sandstrom snorted. "I'm gonna eat."

Sleepy watched his boss disappear up the street. For a moment he stood in silence. Then spurs clinked behind him. He turned to see Bill Ogden, a Triangle-10 puncher. Bill grunted.

"Eatin'?" he asked.

Sleepy considered. "Might as well," he decided. Then, with a backward glance, he muttered: "Hate to leave the herd. They're spooky, Bill."

Bill Ogden nodded. "Shore. Don't blame 'em. Fust they git stampeded. Then we hafta drive 'em straight through town in order to git to this corral. Why anyone'd put loadin' pens in a place where yuh had to drive right down the main street, is beyond me. Some day, when a herd's comin' in, the cows'll git spooked. An' Gus Rattick's town'll git smashed!"

Sleepy grinned. "That," he murmured, "would be too bad."

"Yeah!" Bill's tone was sarçastic. "Yeah—wouldn't it?"

Sleepy gave the puncher a quick glance. "Seems yuh like Rattick."

"Me?" Bill spat with eloquent distaste. "Me? I love the coyote. Like hell! He's plumb crooked. Why, ten years ago he come here with only his slimy brain. Now he owns this whole blamed town! Yessir! Every building is his! A man's gotta be crooked to do that!"

SLEEPY shrugged. "U-huh. Well, where do we eat?"

Bill growled an oath. "If I wasn't so all-fired hungry, I wouldn't eat at all. Gus Rattick owns all them chow-stalls. But I'm practically starved an' my stomach ain't got no morals. Let's hit Chink Eddie's."

Chink Eddie's cafe was almost directly across the street from the bank. Gus Rattick's bank. Sleepy scowled through a dirty window, eyeing the grey structure.

"The lion's den," he muttered. "Jest a-waitin' for Dad Sandstrom to step in—"

He paused, his loaded fork in mid-air. A rider appeared suddenly from the farther shadows, came into a patch of light near the bank. The man's manner caught Sleepy's eye at once. He pulled to a halt in front of the unpainted building, gazed at it as if trying to memorize every detail. Then he spurred on, walking his horse to a hitch-rack in front of the Shotgun Hotel.

"Hmm!" Sleepy muttered inwardly. "Now what's that feller up to? Why does he eye Shotgun's financial center with sech interest? Looked like a coyote circlin' a dyin' steer!"

He stopped eating, leaned forward to watch the man through the window. The fellow tied his horse, strolled slowly across the opposite sidewalk and stepped into the shadows of the hotel building. Sleepy couldn't see him now. But he could still see the glowing tip of the man's cigarette.

"Waitin' for somebody," Sleepy decided. "I wonder—"

He stiffened. All at once he saw another form, coming down the street. A man who walked with cautious stealth, keeping well in the shadows. But Sleepy knew that form only too well!

Gus Rattick!

The banker paused near the hotel. With studied casualness he looked up and down the street. Then, shadowlike, he faded back toward the first man's hiding place. Sleepy cursed softly, sat up straight. He saw the latter's cigarette drop. Obviously the two were talking. But it was soon over. Gus Rattick came into view again, walked toward the bank. The other waited a moment. Then he went slowly up the street toward the railroad.

"Hell!" Sleepy muttered.

Bill Ogden looked up. "Indigestion?"

Sleepy shook his head. "Nope. Was jest thinkin' that things are apt to pop in this burg tonight."

Bill grinned. "Shore. For one thing, I aim to git plenty drunk. I'm gonna take Shotgun apart. Figger on usin' the pieces for firewood this winter. How 'bout you?"

"Back to the corral!" Sleepy said flatly.

Astride the top rail again, he scowled down the street. Peace was on the cowtown. The saloon seemed the only thing alive. From it drifted the muted sounds of a piano. Triangle-10 hands were there, celebrating, and, as usual, Shotgun residents lent a very practised assistance. The street, however, was deserted.

"What's the answer?" Sleepy murmured. "That gent was sizin' up the bank, actin' jest like he meant to crack the place. But the next minute Gus Rattick has a pow-wow with him. What's the answer?"

Behind, in the corral, the cattle bellowed nervously. Sleepy turned to stare at them. Then, suddenly, his brow puckered in a frown.

"Hell! It ain't bolted!"

It was true. The gate stood partly ajar. Sleepy leaped down and strode toward the gate.

"This thing was shore locked when I left to eat," Sleepy muttered. "I wonder—"

He whirled suddenly, drawn by a slight scuffing sound. His hand dropped from the gate, leaving it still unbolted. A heavy body thudded against him. Sleepy grunted, lashed his right fist out as fingers tore at his throat. He jerked away, his fist cracking up again. A muttered curse sounded in his ear. Then something struck his back. Heavy hands grabbed his arms, held them. A sudden crashing pain hit his head. Sleepy gasped and went limp.

HE was not completely out. Dimly, he knew what had happened. A .45 had crashed down, but the blow had been softened by his *sombrero.* Stretched on the ground, he lay still, a heavy, numb sensation pressing down on him. Faintly, he heard voices.

"Shore this is the feller?"

"Yeah—" It was a deep voice that answered. "Yeah. It's him all right. Gus Rattick pointed 'im out to me back in Chink Eddie's. I've watched 'im ever since. He's the feller."

The first speaker chuckled. "He shore fell fer that gate bein' open. Good idea o' yoren, Pete. An' yuh cracked 'im good with yore hog-leg. What'll we do with 'im now?"

"Lift 'im up," ordered Pete. "You grab his head. We'll take 'im over on t'other side o' the corral. Come on! We gotta hurry!"

Sleepy felt himself lifted. He was carried a short distance, then dropped. The man called Pete growled out words.

"You stay here an' watch 'im. You c'n see the bank from here all right. Soon's I come out, put this feller

on a hoss an' travel. Meet me out at the main road. Gus Rattick was ticklish on that point. We gotta git this mug outa the way."

"Scared o' him, eh?" the other muttered. "Well, why not kill 'im right here?"

"Ain't got time!" Pete snapped. "We take 'im with us. Then everybody figgers he pulled the job, see? We can drill 'im later."

Sleepy lay still, feigning unconsciousness. But his mind cleared rapidly. This man called Pete was the rider Gus Rattick had met earlier in the evening. And now Pete was planning to rob the bank!

"Mebbe we oughta tie 'im up," Sleepy heard.

"Naw. He's out cold," Pete grumbled. "An' anyway, I'm movin'. This job's gotta click jest right. Must be almost ten o'clock now."

THROUGH half-closed eyes, Sleepy saw the other strike a match and consult his watch.

"Yeah. 'Bout ten minutes to." The man was silent a moment. Then: "This job's loco, Pete. I don't git it at all. Why should Rattick hire us to rob his own bank? Shore seems like he's got a trap set—"

"Naw!" Pete snapped. "Gus has his own reasons. This Sandstrom feller owes Gus money, see? If the money ain't paid by midnight, Gus takes Sandstrom's ranch. Well, I'm to bust in right after the cattle buyer pays Sandstrom. But I stick 'em up before he pays Gus, see? I take the cash. I take a little o' Gus Rattick's, too, so's the job won't look fishy. But it'll break Sandstrom. Then Gus'll git the ranch."

The other man grumbled. "I don't like it. It's risky."

"Risky!" Pete laughed. "Why, it ain't risky at all! The town marshal takes orders from Gus. He'll be outa the way tonight. An' the Triangle-10 buckaroos'll be celebratin'. This feller here was the only one we had to look out fer. Gus figgered he was too danged suspicious. But he's fixed, ain't he?"

"All right," growled the other man. "But yuh better git goin'. It's damned near ten o'clock."

The man named Pete moved away. Sleepy lay still, scarcely letting himself breathe. The whole plan was clear now. Gus Rattick, having failed in his attempt to keep the herd from being delivered, had formed a new scheme. And Sleepy could see that it was a good one.

No one, certainly, would accuse Rattick of robbing his own bank. The bandits themselves were in little danger. The celebration at the saloon would be at its height right now. Few men—if any—would be on the street.

Sleepy checked every angle, watching his guard through narrowed eyes. The man moved forward and kicked out to test his prisoner's state of consciousness. Though the sharp boots dug painfully at his ribs, Sleepy did not stir. The bandit, growling a satisfied oath, turned away, fumbling in his pockets. Then Sleepy saw him start to roll a cigarette.

In that instant, the waddy saw his chance!

He tensed, waited. The man struck a match. Wavering light struck the stubble-covered face. In that moment, Sleepy snapped erect.

The man grunted a curse, batting his eyes. He stepped back as Sleepy hurled himself forward. The waddy's fist shot out, cracked against the gaping jaw. The bandit grunted, but did not lose his feet. Dimly, Sleepy saw the fellow's shoulders hunch, saw his hand streak down.

When the hand came up, it held the dull gleam of gun metal. Sleepy thrust out, grasped the upraised arm. Blinding flame licked the darkness, and the roar of the shot crashed his ears deafeningly.

The bandit's aim was knocked aside. The lead whistled off into the air—a clean miss.

Sleepy lunged again, his fist driving hard to the man's chin. A gasp broke from the fellow's lips and he staggered. The gun slipped from his fingers, thudded the dust. Frantically, the man darted away.

Almost in pursuit, Sleepy paused.

Rumbling, chaotic sounds were rising about him. Something crashed. A wild, maddened bellowing split the night's stillness.

Sleepy cursed, whirled. For an instant he was unable to understand just what happened there in the darkness. One glance now and he knew. Within the corral, hundreds of crazed bodies surged. The air trembled with snorts and bellows. Hoofs thundered and horns cracked.

The herd was again in stampede!

That shot had been too much. The cattle, already nervous, had gone mad. Even as Sleepy stared, the first of the herd surged through the open gate. Like an avalanche, they swept down Shotgun's narrow street. Others crashed against the sturdy corral fence like maddened devils. In the merest instant the entire mass was gone, thundering into the dust-filled night!

DUST blotted all but a few faint streaks of light. Sleepy ran by instinct rather than sight. One thought hammered in his brain. The bank! Get to the bank before—

A frightened steer plunged suddenly into the street, coming from an alleyway to the right. With no sense of direction, the crazed animal sheered toward the saloon. Sleepy twisted to look back as he ran. He saw the steer crash through the saloon's flap doors. Almost instantly, men piled from two front windows. Their curses rose above the chaos of the stampede.

Some of them, Sleepy knew, were Triangle-10 hands. He shouted, without stopping:

"After 'em! After 'em!"

A dark form staggered through the dust. A voice reached Sleepy's ear—Bill Ogden's voice, hugely disgusted:

"An' I figgered I was gonna' have the fun a-tearin' this burg apart!"

Sleepy didn't stop. The din of the cattle seemed lessened now, and as he neared the bank, he heard other sounds. Crazy, crashing sounds that came from within the structure.

The bank's front door was open, torn half off its hinges. But Sleepy paid no heed. Breathless, he leaped into the small lobby.

Crouched there, he stared in surprise.

A huge black steer was inside. With maddened blindness, it plowed from wall to wall. Dad Sandstrom dodged and scrambled, hatless and panting. Gus Rattick clung precariously to the bars over the teller's cage. Hanlon was just disappearing into the next room.

Sleepy's sudden arrival made things even worse. The steer shied madly, shook its head, bellowed. Then, with a shake of horns, it rushed across the room. Straight for the huge front window it went. A single leap carried the huge body up—through the pane of glass.

The shattering impact shook the whole building. Glass crashed. The steer disappeared into the outside night. Silence fell, broken only by the muted din from the street.

"The bandit!" Sleepy panted. "Where's the bandit?"

Dad Sandstrom sighed deeply, relaxed against the wall. Gus Rattick slipped from his perch and mopped his pasty face. Hanlon stuck his head cautiously through the door.

"What kind of a town is this?" Hanlon roared. "First a mug throws a cannon in my face—an' the next minute a bunch o' loco cows walk all over me! What the hell!"

Sleepy stared at Dad Sandstrom. "Where's the bandit?"

"Bandit?" Dad Sandstrom blinked dazedly. "Bandit?"

Hanlon cursed again. "Where'n hell yuh think? When that cloudburst o' beef hit, he turned tail an' vamoosed, that's what!"

"Without the money?" Sleepy asked.

Dad Sandstrom nodded vigorously. He held up two gnarled fists and squinted at them owlishly. And then Sleepy grinned. For both the rancher's hands were stuffed with greenbacks!

"Money—" Dad Sandstrom echoed. "Seems I'm lousy with money. I'm danged if I know what *did* happen!"

(Concluded on page 102)

LEATHER LAWYER

"Drop them reins!"

Sharp Eyes and Wits Are Matched Against Range Lynch-Law

By SYL MacDOWELL

Author of "Skull Valley," "Colts and Calico," etc.

UNDER the big oak in Cholo Canyon was an ominous half-circle of riders, twelve of them. Grim and unsmiling they faced a thirteenth man on a droopy grey that was hot and blowing from a very recent chase.

The prisoner was young, hatless, and his blue eyes stared helplessly up at the rope that dangled from a limb and was looped around his throbbing neck. His clenched hands were knotted behind him.

One of his captors kneed forward. He was a barrel-shaped man, older than the others, with a wedge-shaped jaw like a rattler's and the same snake-hard eyes.

He took hold of the grey's reins.

"Now before we let yuh swing, Ed Trimble," the big man rumbled, "and on yore own rope, which is proper, I'll jest review the evidence which proves yuh're a low-down rustler. About a hour back, me an' my outfit observes one o' my Rafter-T cows nursin' her calf fresh-branded with yore 2-C. My outfit collects yuh up after a runnin' fight. In yore possession they find a runnin' iron, still warm from the fire.

Trimble waited

"Them circumstances, they'd convince any court this side o' hell that yuh're guilty. So we're takin' the law into our own hands. If yuh got any last word—"

The doomed man's eyes left their tragic contemplation of the rope. They steadied on the other's accusing face.

"My last word, it's the same as my first," he stated bitterly. "And that is, Lampry, that yuh're a miserable, two-tongued liar when yuh say I rustled yore Rafter-T stock. This here rope, it's around the wrong neck. You should be wearin' it, not me. And if I live, I swear to God I'll prove—"

"Yore final utterance ought to be pious, not profane, Trimble," interrupted the big man with a deepening scowl.

"Aw, quit argyin', boss," spoke up one of the watching riders. "Jerk his hoss from under him an' have it done with!"

"A convicted *hombre* is entitled to his last say," declared Lampry, gripping the grey's reins a little tighter.

"I've had my say," said Trimble. He was hardly more than twenty, almost a youth. But he faced his fate like a man. "Haul away, Lampry, and be damned to yuh!"

LAMPREY'S mouth clamped tight and he drew the reins taut. The grey's head came up. It pulled back a little, for it was not used to being led with a rider on its back. Lampry jerked again. The grey lifted a forefoot and started forward.

Then, from beyond the oak, where the chaparral formed a dense wall, the dry brush crackled and parted and a newcomer on a tall, red horse sprang into the open with startling suddenness. He wore a black hat, town clothes and string tie at his long, loose-collared neck.

"Hole on there, old-timer!" he sang out in a nasal voice singularly far-reaching. He bolted up with flapping, bony elbows.

Lampry's hand slacked on the grey's reins.

"Who in blazes are you t' interfere?" he blazed.

"It's 'Windy' Waco, that danged scarecrow lawyer from Prescott!" yelped Riker, the Rafter-T rider who had urged a hasty hanging. "He's got no biz'ness tuh—"

Windy Waco's high-powered, nasal voice drowned out Riker's fuming protest.

"I got a blame good right t' interfere with any violation o' the Territorial codes made an' provided," he interrupted. "Besides which," he added with a shrewd twist of his wide mouth, "lynchings like this deprive me o' income an' livelihood."

"Yeah!" jeered Riker. "Windy kin straddle a question better'n he kin straddle a hoss! Go on, boss! Git that grey from under Trimble!"

Lampry muttered an oath and started to haul on the reins again. Windy Waco's long right arm made a sudden motion under his coat tails and came out gripping a blunt six-gun. It was leveled steadily at Lampry's bulging front.

"Start thinkin' about makin' out yore will, old-timer," he advised. "And drop them reins before I blast yuh loose from 'em!"

Lampry gaped, reddened like a turkey buzzard, then obeyed. Young Trimble was as astounded as the others at Windy Waco's unheralded appearance. A new light had leaped into his blue eyes. He regarded Windy Waco with hopeful interest.

Waco faced him.

"I come along on a cow trail in time to hear yore remark that this beer-bellied gazabo ought to be wearin' that rope," he said. "Now jest what was you hintin' at, young feller?"

Ed Trimble flexed his sinewy, tanned neck several times to ease the grip of the rasping hemp.

"Well, I squatted on a section o' open range last season a little beyond here," he explained in an even, unhurried manner that bore conviction. "Since the first, Lampry here, and all other big stockmen, been tryin' to haze me off the range. I

reckon they played about ev'ry card in the deck, but I sat tight. Today I come on one o' my own cows, with 2-C on her left hip. She had two spring calves. One o' them calves wore a Rafter-T! I cussed a little, then roped the other calf an' put on my 2-C with a running iron. A little while later this Rafter-T outfit comes whoopin' and shootin' out of a draw."

"Did yuh resist?"

Trimble said:

"I had no gun on me." He turned and fixed Riker with a hostile stare. "If I had, that bat-eared jigger would never 'a' got me."

Riker grunted and rubbed a swelling lump under one eye.

"I wish to hell I'd plugged yuh!" he stated flatly.

Windy Waco's blunt gun was still leveled across the top of his saddle horn. He said to Lampry:

"What yuh got to say about yore brand bein' on a 2-C calf?"

"Trimble is a cockeyed liar!" thundered the rancher.

"That's what he calls you," retorted the lawyer, stretching one long leg out of a stirrup. "It looks like we got to find some witnesses."

"In this wilderness? Huh!" said Riker. "There ain't no witnesses."

"Oh, yes there was, cowboy," contradicted Windy Waco.

"Who? You, I reckon?"

"Nope. The calves in question!"

One of the Rafter-T riders haw-hawed.

"Say, this is shore comical!" he laughed. "Here we're about to string up a man on his own rope. And now you let on as how yuh'll git the calf he stole with it to clear him! Yuh rode too far in the hot sun, Windy!"

The lawyer eased his gangling frame half around in the saddle.

"I rode too far, mebbe," he admitted, "but it didn't affect me none. Not in the head. Now the law is, a unbranded calf belongs to the brand its mother wears."

"Yuh don't got to go teachin' *me* range law!" stormed Lampry. He reached toward the grey's reins, but jerked in his hand as Windy Waco made a hostile motion with the short-barreled six-gun.

"I'll teach yuh some sense if you do that again," he promised. "Fact is, yuh're sort o' shy on sense, anyhow, old-timer. Else yuh'd 've knowed from the start how this thing happened."

"A chair-warmin' shyster like you aims to explain the cow biz'ness to us who work at it, huh?" ridiculed Riker. He was inching his right hand toward his holster as he spoke.

Windy Waco's tone sharpened as he jabbed the short six-gun around toward the cowboy.

"Shuck that Colt, cowboy, or yuh'll never work at the cow business again!" he rasped. "Shuck it and drop it! Quick-like and pleasant!"

Riker tensed. His restless eyes estimated his chances of a draw against that weapon jarring toward him. Then he gave a despairing shrug. He fingered his gun out and let it drop to the dust, cursing.

WINDY WACO became amiable again.

"It's like yuh said, cowboy," he began. "I can clamp onto a technicality easier'n I can clamp onto a bronco. But today I done both as I rode over dip, spur and angle, headed for a water contest hearin' over at Harper Wells. In other words, I kept my eyes open. And here's what I seen."

He had his audience with him now. The Rafter-T riders were listening, their mob hostility dimming. It was close onto noon and getting too hot there in Cholo Canyon to do anything very long and intensely, even hating.

"Go on," said Lampry, wiping his wet forehead with a sleeve.

"I kept my eyes open," the lawyer repeated, "and this is what I seen. This is a varmint country, with plenty mountain lion and quite a few bear."

"That's right," nodded Trimble.

"Well, there was varmint scent in

the air and the cows was mighty uneasy. When they grazed out in the open, in spots like this, they didn't have no young, frisking calves with 'em. I wondered about that. Next thing I observe is that the spring calves was hid back in the brush. One cow stood guard over two-three, sometimes four calves. One her own, but the extry calves belongin' to other cows."

Lampry's mouth hung partly open.

"That's straight," he admitted. "I've seen 'em do it. The cows trade on and off at the job o' tendin' the calves thataway. But what—"

Windy Waco grinned.

"This explains how the Rafter-T brand was on a 2-C calf," he concluded, "and it explains how this young feller might o' got his brand onto a Rafter-T critter. It also explains how a lot o' brand rumpuses and range lynchings and killings git started in this here Territory. Now, old-timer, are yuh still cravin' to string this defendant up?"

Lampry looked as doleful as a work mule. The war light had died from his eyes. He thought for a moment, then jerked his hat brim down with an impulsive gesture and reined beside Ed Trimble. He unknotted the rope that bound the prisoner's arms.

"I aim to be a just man," he said hoarsely. "I'm shore glad now I made no horrible mistake. I reckon all differences is settled now, ain't they, Trimble?"

With his freed hands the younger man whipped the loop from his neck and let it drop to the dust where Riker's gun lay.

Then he swung abruptly down from the saddle. His eyes danced with a savage, purposeful light. His bronzed fists were hard, knotted knobs.

"Not yet it don't!" he gritted. "There's one more technicality which needs settlin' out o' court!"

He turned on the startled Riker.

"Climb down, cowboy!" he ordered. "Neither one o' us is wearin' guns now!"

THE BAD PENNY STAMPEDE

(Concluded from page 98)

"Give it to Gus!" Sleepy ordered. "Gus—you git that mortgage an' hand 'er over!"

Gus Rattick's face was streaked with fear. He stared blankly for a moment, then nodded.

"My beef—" Hanlon cursed.

"Yeah," Sleepy murmured. "*Yore* beef. Yuh'd paid Dad 'fore they busted out. So they belong to you now. Better git after 'em, Hanlon. The boys'll help. Yuh may lose a few—but not many."

The cattle buyer rushed out, cursing everything that looked like a cow. Sleepy turned back to Gus Rattick. The banker handed the mortgage paper to Dad Sandstrom, clutched the money.

"Fine!" Sleepy murmured. He looked at Gus Rattick and grinned. "Don't shake like that, Gus. Shore I know what yuh had planned. But I figger to let it drop. Dad's got the ranch back an' that's all I care 'bout. I'd hate like hell to soil a perfectly good jail with yore carcass, anyhow. Only let me tell yuh this—if I ever catch yuh within fifty miles of the Triangle-10, I'll hang yuh up for the buzzards to peck at!"

Gus Rattick licked his lips. He blinked and sighed. His eyes, drifting from Sleepy's face, sought the shattered window. Beyond, in the night, lay the battered remains of Shotgun's main street.

Sleepy grinned, sensing the banker's thoughts.

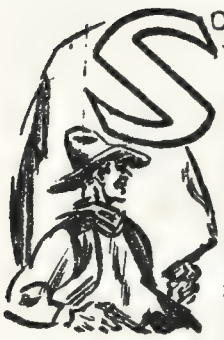
"Yeah—yore town's kinda ruined, Gus. But, bein' a banker, yuh oughta know that bad pennies always return." He chuckled and motioned Dad Sandstrom toward the door. "Yeah. Yuh invested a lot o' bad pennies in a shady deal, Gus. An' they stampeded on yuh. Danged if they didn't!"

"Sourdough" Dill Almost Cashes His Checks in

PAYSTRIKE

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Author of "Two-Gun Ghost," "Hoss Sense," etc.



SOURDOUGH DILL whistled tunelessly as he mixed the batter for the biscuits he was going to bake. Glancing out through the window of the cabin at the snow-covered trail leading down the mountain, the old prospector suddenly grew tense as he spied two figures approaching.

"Jake Clide an' Hank Ruff," he murmured. "They're comin' here to rob me o' them nuggets I found, I'll bet yuh."

He put down the pan of dough and hastily grabbed up his rifle, cursed as he remembered that he had used his last bullet to kill a rabbit that morning. He had planned going into the little cowtown five miles away and getting more ammunition.

"I gotta work fast," he exclaimed. "Them jaspers'll be here in a minute."

He dropped the rifle against the wall and became very busy in the next few seconds. He was again calmly mixing the dough when a hard knock sounded on the cabin door.

"Who's there?" called Dill, going to the door.

"Jake Clide," came a voice from outside. "Let me in, Sourdough. It's cold out here."

Dill unlatched the door and drew it open. It was very possible that if he refused to admit the two men, they might try to smoke him out by setting fire to the cabin.

"Come in," he said, and the two men stepped into the cabin.

"We ain't wastin' no time, Dill," snapped Clide. "We want that gold yuh found—where is it?"

"Try an' find it." Dill glared at him defiantly. "That's my gold an' you won't git it."

With a roar of rage Clide leaped at the old man. He sent a fist crashing against Dill's chin. Sourdough thudded against the wall and then slid to the floor, to remain there motionless.

"That settles him," said Ruff. "Let's look fer the gold."

The two men spent fully twenty minutes searching the cabin, tearing it all apart as much as was humanly possible without actually taking down the place log by log. From his place on the floor Dill watched them, while still pretending to be unconscious.

"It ain't here," said Clide finally. "We gotta make th' old buzzard tell us where it's hid."

They lifted Dill to his feet, battered him. He staggered weakly to the table.

"All right," he said. "I'll tell. Th' gold is under the floor."

Both men went to work. As they worked, Bill dug in the pan of dough. He flung a ball of the stuff at Clide—caught him squarely on the back of the head and he went down. A second ball of dough caught Ruff full in the face. Blood spurted from a cut cheek.

Dill leaped forward, wrenched the heavy gun from Ruff's holster. In a moment he had moved back and was covering the two men.

"I got yuh now," he said grimly. "Reckon that's one time when biscuits was shore worth their weight in gold. I hid them nuggets in the dough."

The TRAIL SOUTH

A Complete Novelette of Hell's Oven

By LARRY A. HARRIS

Author of "Hombres from Hell," "A Killer Comes Back," etc.

CHAPTER I

Shadow of Murder

SHE was a big-framed woman, husky as a mule-skinner. They called her "Big Bertha." Those double-gunned brush-dusters south of the Rio had dubbed her that. But she didn't seem to mind. In fact on the sun-baked wall of her 'dobe saloon that stood alone at the edge of Hell's Oven in Chihuahua she had that name printed in huge red letters.

She stood behind the long black bar idly polishing a *cerveza* glass.

Tom Rice Rides Hell-Bent to the Border to

His fist smashed at Munns. Behind him a gun barrel flashed

Then she laid it down and brushed a large red hand across her flushed face. As she dried her hands on the flour sack apron about her thick waist her appraising grey eyes turned again toward her only customer. He stood opposite her, a denim-clad gent, one booted foot on the worn brass rail. He was broad-shouldered, rangy and young.

"That there's a rider comin' in," she said.

Head Off a Lowdown, Bushwhacking Killer!

The drinker raised his head and listened. It didn't seem to make a lot of differnece to him if a hundred men were riding in.

"I didn't hear anything."

"Listen."

He heard it then. The hoofs of a running bronc were beating a swift tattoo, coming closer. In the packed sand just outside the 'dobe saloon building a rider wheeled in short. Nervous hoofs chopped in the dust. Spurs tinkled. Booted feet appeared below the flapping doors. A Mexican, red eyes blinking in the gloom, stepped toward the bar. He nodded to Big Bertha, then looked at the lone drinker.

"Me, I got a letter for Tom Rice. You Tom Rice, *senor?*"

The young cowpuncher's body stiffened just the slightest. He looked quickly from Big Bertha back to the Mexican. His slate blue eyes were narrow. He nodded and said, "Sure." He took the sealed envelope. The Mexican moved quickly to the door.

The young man started to call him back. Then changed his mind. As he tore open the envelope the clatter of hoofs receding in the distance was the only sound to break the afternoon hush. He read the message and a slow flush crept over his lean, bronzed features. He looked up from the letter at Big Bertha.

After a long moment he said: "I'm goin' back north of the Rio tonight, Bertha."

"Letters can fetch you a heap of trouble, Tom," she said. "Now once—"

"Not this one, Bertha. It's from my girl. She's askin' me to meet her at the old shack this side of Cottonwood tonight at twelve. She's got something important to tell me."

"She lives in Cottonwood—across the river?" Big Bertha asked.

"With her aunt in Cottonwood," he said quietly. "Her name is Ruth Benson."

Tom Rice wasn't the only gent who had talked freely to Big Bertha. The owl-hooters who rode the river said she knew enough to hang a dozen men. But they respected Big Bertha, those gents of the dark trails who rode in and out of her place. She kept her place straight — and didn't talk! Once, Border gossip had it, a smirking, drunken killer tried to get tough with her. She killed him. Gave him a chance to go for his gun, but beat him to the draw. Then she cussed everybody in the place and went to her little back room at the rear of the saloon building where they said she cried like a baby.

"What you hidin' out for anyway, Tom?" she asked softly. "I can't *sabe* it. You been hangin' around here for three weeks, broodin' an' waitin' for something to happen. What's wrong, kid?"

"NOTHIN'S the matter, Bertha," he said curtly.

"Oh," Big Bertha sighed wisely. "I thought something was the matter." She started back to her glass polishing.

Tom Rice faced her across the bar. His jaw muscles were knotted.

"I'll tell yuh, Bertha," he said very quickly, resignedly. "Mebbe nobody else'll ever git to know the truth. But yuh'll know it. Three weeks ago Pap an' I had a fuss. We never used to fuss. Never had no trouble a-tall 'til Sis married this—skunk an' brought him out to the Double Bar to live with us. Then he made it hell for us all. Sis died. He kept on livin' out at the ranch. He got me an' Pap to fightin'."

Rice hesitated, voice bitter, low. "Then three weeks ago Pap was shot —bushwhacker's lead—out on the trail to town. I rode up about then an' I was bendin' over Pap when Sheriff Roper Link from Cottonwood an' this—this brother-in-law skunk found me. I had a spent shell in my gun. But honest to Godfrey I didn't shoot him. Why me'n Pap was—"

"What then, Tom?"

"This snake who married my sister threw down on me—told the sheriff I done it. I saw red then, went for my gun. There was some shootin' an' I had to hightail it down here."

Rice's square shoulders drooped. His voice lowered. "But I didn't do it, Bertha. I didn't do it."

"You didn't do it, Tom," Big Bertha said. "I believe you." And her voice didn't sound quite natural.

"*He* killed Pap—damn him—I know!" he said huskily. "I'm gonna kill him—*tonight!*"

"Who, Tom?"

"Duke Munns—the skunk that married my sister! He killed Pap—"

Tom Rice wasn't looking at Big Bertha when he said it. He was looking toward the batwing doors, tiny flames of hate burning in his eyes. Big Bertha's big frame drew rigid, like a horse that has been struck with a quirt. She stared at Tom Rice's profile, her jaw sagging. The flush on her face faded to a bloodless white.

"Duke Munns." Her voice was almost a whisper but the two words became a part of the air. "Duke Munns," she repeated.

Still Tom Rice didn't look at her. Stiffly, grim purpose in his strides, he moved toward the door. His boot heels clicked in the silence. Somehow he looked older than his twenty-three years. Haunting, bitter memories had changed him. Even three weeks along the dark trails south of the Rio sometimes change a gent. It had changed Tom Rice.

"*Adios,* Bertha," he called from the door. And he didn't look back.

Watching him, Big Bertha stood behind the bar, staring, like a person in a trance. She was still standing there, her huge frame unmoving, as the receding hoof beats of Tom's bronc faded completely in the distance. Then she shook herself as if to clear her vision.

Walking quickly to the end of the bar she opened a drawer and brought out a stubby pencil and paper. She scribbled a brief note and signed her name. Then she pushed through a door that led into her room at the rear of the saloon. In five minutes she came out dressed in faded denims, broad brimmed hat and scuffed boots.

She moved agilely for a person of her size, every movement speaking of strength. She took the note she had just written and tacked it up on the outside of the batwing doors.

It read:

I'll be back pretty soon. Pour your own drinks and put the money in that little box at the end of the bar.

Bertha.

Then she went around to the rear of the building to a shed where she kept her horse. She slapped a rig on the bronc as competently as any cowhand could have done. Mounting, she rode north, across the sand-scorched lowlands of catclaw and mesquite, toward the Rio three miles to the north.

CHAPTER II

Noose End

IN the salt cedar *bosque* on the Mexican bank of the Rio, Tom Rice hunkered down on boot heels, smoking, and waiting impatiently for darkness. No sound but the murmur of the river broke the afternoon stillness. At his back his bronc stood with drooping head, reins trailing.

As the sun dropped behind the Sierras to the west, Tom rose and began pacing back and forth between two brushy sandbanks. The torturing, poignant memories of all that had happened the past three weeks came flooding into his mind.

Rice's hand, gripping the black-butted six-gun at his side, was white at the knuckles. Then he recalled his father, old Brandon Rice, the fiery but kindly old cowman who had held the respect of every cattleman in the Big Bend.

I'll git him, Pap!" Rice promised huskily. "Munns got yuh, Pap! Now I'm gonna kill him!"

Rice forgot that he hadn't eaten since morning. He smoked incessantly. Finally it came dark.

When Rice judged it to be about midnight, he mounted his bronc and splashed out into the purling muddy waters of the knee-deep Rio Grande. He rode up on the north bank, shot his bronc up a brush-choked coulee. Across the rolling, mesquite-dotted country of the Big Bend he kept his bronc at a lope.

He topped a rise. Down below him, almost hidden in the sandhills and mesquite, he spotted the old crumbling-walled 'dobe shack. He eased his horse down the slope, rode boldly forward through the grey moonlight.

Ten feet from the sagging plank door of the shack, Rice drew reins. As his right hand slid gunward, something stirred at the dark window of the shack.

Cursing, Rice whirled, right hand slapping down to the butt of his gun. Too late! The moonlight glinted from a gunbarrel in the dark window—pointed straight at him.

"HIST 'em, Rice! I've got yuh this time!"

The words jarred into Tom Rice's senses like knife stabs. He had walked into a trap like a bleating woolie! Duke Munns' trap! Ruth Benson hadn't sent him that note!

Rice's mind whirled. He fought back the fury that welled up in him. Slowly, steadily, he raised both arms.

"Munns!" he gritted softly. "Speak yore piece—yuh dirty bushwhackin' skunk!"

Six-gun jutting from his fist, Duke Munns climbed through the window of the shack. He was stockily built. His stubby legs seemed to be too short for the rest of his body. Beneath the brim of his brown Stetson his close-set black eyes glittered snake-like. As he swaggered out into the moonlight toward Tom Rice's bronc, he grinned, mirthlessly. Then another figure strode quickly out of the door of the shack, following Munns toward Rice. He was tall, grizzled faced and sullen. A star gleamed on his sagging vest.

"Roper Link!" Rice whispered incredulously.

Duke Munns laughed, harsh and low.

"Yeah, this is Sheriff Roper Link, Rice. An' yuh know what we're gonna do? We're—"

Tom Rice cut him short. He spoke through lips that didn't move.

"It don't matter what yuh're plannin' to do, Munns," he said tightly. "Nothin' matters to me now except killin' yuh."

Duke Munns grinned exultantly though his eyes smoldered with hate.

"Climb down off the hoss, Rice," he said coldly.

Rice dismounted, standing with his hands in the air.

Sheriff Link brushed a nervous paw across his bearded cheek.

"Let's hurry an' git this over with, Munns."

Duke Munns' thin lips curled in a snarl. His hot eyes locked with Rice's.

"We're gonna hang yuh, Rice," he rasped. "I hate yuh. Always did hate yuh. I'd had the Double Bar Ranch a long time ago if it hadn't been for you. Yore old man's dead. Yuh damned right I killed him! His heirs will all be dead when yuh're out of the way. Then the ranch comes to me. See? I'm yore poor dead sister's heir." He grinned malignantly. "I knowed a note from yore gal would fetch yuh back. I heard yuh was at Big Bertha's Saloon across the Line. I found an old letter this Ruth Benson filly had writ yuh. I copied her style of writin' an' sent yuh that note."

Behind clenched teeth, Tom Rice bit back all that he wanted to call this man who had one time married his sister. Through a dancing red haze he saw Duke Munns' leering, evil face.

Sheriff Roper Link strode quickly back into the shack and came out leading two saddled broncs. Body rigid, Rice still stood with his arms in the air while Duke Munns jerked the gun from his holster and tossed it off to one side in the brush. Then Roper Link came up to Munns' side, knotting a slip loop at one end of a rope.

"Didn't ever think yuh'd die kickin' at the end of a rope, did yuh, Rice?" Munns sneered. "Ain't afraid, are yuh?"

"I ain't afraid of anything yuh might do, yella-belly," Tom Rice muttered fiercely.

But he was afraid. He didn't show it though. He didn't want to die. They were going to hang him. String him up to one of the roof poles that jutted out of the 'dobe building wall. They were going to hang him up there to die, strangling, just the tips of his scuffed boots touching the dirt, and his hands bound behind his back. They'd taunt him and laugh as he dangled helplessly at the end of the rope, then ride away—

Sheriff Roper Link took a piece of rawhide from his pocket. He stepped behind Rice to thong his hands behind him.

"The kid's got nerve, Munns," Link conceded uneasily. "Got nerve like his old man had—"

"Shut up, Link!" Munns snarled. "Nobody's askin' yore idee of nerve. Hurry up— *Hey!*"

Springing like a puma, Rice's body was shooting through space—straight at the startled Duke Munns. Before a shot could be fired, Rice's right fist smashed into Munns' mottled face, sprawling him back on the ground while both his hands clawed the air. Sheriff Link swore.

Rice whirled. Spun about just in time to see a gun barrel flashing downward in the moonlight. He struck out—too late. A thousand swirling lights shot across his brain, pain blinding him. He hit the ground. He couldn't move.

Then he felt the rope around his neck. Felt himself being lifted, the hemp tightening, strangling him. Everything was all blurry, hideous and unreal. Vaguely came the indistinct voices of Munns and Link.

He tried to fight. Tried to curse them but the words lodged in his throat. His feet were dangling. He was kicking.

And Duke Munns was laughing at him—taunting him. His lungs were afire, ears roaring. It sounded like the thunder of stampeding cattle—hoofs bearing down on him.

Rice's lips moved but no sound escaped them. Then he knew no more as he was swept into merciful oblivion.

CHAPTER III

Dead Lawman

TOM RICE thought his body was being catapulted through space. He heard voices. At first he thought it was Duke Munns and Sheriff Roper Link talking. He tried to fight back at them. But it was like a horrible nightmare. He couldn't move. Then he opened his eyes. Through a blur, the first person he saw was Ruth Benson. She was bending over him, calling his name, frantically massaging his wrists. He was flat on his back in the soft sand, close to the 'dobe shack where Munns and Link had left him to die at the end of a rope.

Rice pushed himself up to a sitting position, blinking to clear his vision.

"Ruth," he murmured. "What are yuh—yuh doing here?"

Ruth Benson, face pale in the dim light, tried to smile.

"Oh, Tom!" she cried thankfully. "You're alive! That's all that matters now. We—we got here just as they were riding off—"

"We?" Rice asked quickly, puzzledly. He was on his feet now, the girl rising beside him.

"Yes—this big woman and I," she said breathlessly. "Oh, I understand it all, Tom. She came riding into Cottonwood about an hour ago and found me at my aunt's. She wanted to know if I'd written you a note asking you to meet me here at midnight. When I told her I hadn't she didn't wait for any more. She wouldn't explain anything. She made me come with her and we found you

—you hanging there—still alive. She helped me cut you down. Then when she saw you were going to be all right she left—rode south toward the river."

Rice's mind was racing back over all that had happened.

"Bertha," he said. "That was Big Bertha."

Rice couldn't *sabe* everything that had happened either. Big Bertha was the only person he had told about the note.

"Who is Big Bertha, Tom?"

Rice was searching hurriedly about in the gloom for the gun Duke Munns had taken from him and tossed aside in the brush. He found it, jammed it in his holster.

"No time to explain now, Ruth!" he gritted. "I'm goin' after the yella-livered bushwhacker that killed my Pap! You fog it on back to Cottonwood—"

"Tom!" cried the girl. "I'm going with you!"

Rice was already running through the mesquite toward his bronc that was still standing, reins trailing, close by. He hit leather, jerked up the reins. As his bronc leaped forward under the spurs he heard the girl's warning cry.

"Tom!" she cried. "Tom—"

"HEAD for Cottonwood, Ruth!" Rice yelled. "I'll be back *pronto!*"

He didn't look back any more then. Eyes glued to the brush-hemmed trail ahead, he rode furiously toward his old home—the Double Bar. He had a hunch he'd likely find Duke Munns at the ranch. If Munns wasn't there he'd set out on his trail to find him if it led through the fires of hell!

The night wind whipped Rice's cheeks, ruffled his blond hair. His racing bronc shot over a rise, tore hell-for-leather down a slope. Ahead in the gloom twinkled a light at the window of the Double Bar ranch house. His home! The forty-section spread that his pap, old Brandon Rice, had wrested from this wild country of the Big Bend.

Rice cursed bitterly, hand slapping down to the gun-butt at his hip, as he hammered nearer the house. He remembered the *mestizo* down south of the Line who, only a week ago, had told him how Duke Munns had fired all the old riders and was bringing in gun-slingers to guard his interests.

Rice didn't tighten reins until he got to the portico of the house. Then he wheeled in short, the bronc's hoofs bunching in the gravel. He hit dirt on a dead run. A saddled horse stood in the shadows next to the house. Sheriff Roper Link's mount!

Gun in hand, Rice banged open the front door, dashed into the large living room. His hot eyes flicked about. Acrid gunsmoke stung his nostrils. On a large table in the center of the room an oil lamp smoked and sputtered in the silence that seemed to speak of death.

"Munns!" Rice called hoarsely. "I've come for yore hide, Munns!"

Rice's saddle-hardened body jerked rigid as a low groan stung his ears! A groan that came from the floor, just ahead! Rice saw the outflung body. The table spread had hidden it from view.

Bounding around the table, Rice dropped to one knee. Sheriff Roper Link, face white as alkali, the front of his flannel shirt blood-smeared, lay in a twist on the floor.

Rice raised the crooked lawman's head. His eyes fluttered open. He started, stared transfixed at Rice who was bending over him. His lips moved.

"Rice!" he croaked weakly. "Yuh're —*dead!*"

"Nope, Link!" Rice rapped. "*Yuh're* dead an' Munns is gonna die! Where is he, Link—yuh crooked snake? Where is Duke Munns?"

"I'll—tell—" Link's ashen face twitched with convulsions of pain. Hate flared into his filmy eyes. He gasped for breath. "I—didn't wanta do it—Munns held the whip hand. He knew my past. We left yuh—rode here. I was to pay Munns—ten thousand dollars—for the ranch. He was

wantin' to leave. He did—but he shot me—in the back first. He was afraid—"

"Hurry, Link!"

"He's got—got my ten thousand in cash!"

"Where'd he go?"

"Git him—Rice! Blast him once—for me!" Link's eyes rolled in their sockets. A rattle came in his throat. "He—took—the trail—south—"

Link was dead. Rice lowered the sheriff's head to the floor and leaped to his feet.

Rice's eyes roved the room which he had once called home. Poignant memories again flashed into his mind.

For a long moment, he didn't move. He just stood, body rigid, arms down at his sides, the gun still in his right hand. When he spoke, his voice, throbbing and low, seemed to echo endlessly in the deathly hush of the room.

"I'll git him, Pap," he whispered. "I'll git him!"

Then he ran out the front door of the house, leaped astride his bronc and rode like a madman straight south—toward the Rio Grande and Big Bertha's Saloon that lay at the edge of Hell's Oven.

CHAPTER IV

Headin' South

BIG BERTHA leaned over the shiny bartop and stared thoughtfully at the four gents with double-guns who were gambling at one of the green-topped, battered tables.

She was still wearing the faded denims, a man's white shirt and old scuffed cowhide boots. There was a flour sack apron around her large waist, worn and soiled in front where she had rubbed against the bar. Overhead, suspended from one of the crude beams, the large kerosene lamps sputtered, sending a flickering yellow glow over the barroom.

Everything was quiet except for an occasional grunt from one of the men. That and the clink of the chips and the slap of the cards.

Big Bertha didn't seem to know what to do with herself. She brushed her pudgy hand across her flushed face. Her gaze shuttled restlessly to the door. She stared out over the shuttered tops into the dark night beyond.

At the table the four men looked up at her curiously. One of them said something. But Big Bertha kept staring toward the door, as if waiting for some one.

"I said we'd pull out any time yuh wanta close the place, Bertha," the man repeated. "Or are yuh gonna start keepin' open all night?"

"I ain't gonna close tonight," she said tonelessly. "I'm kinda expectin' company."

She looked back toward the door. Outside where the mesquite bushes loomed up darkly in the moonlight all was quiet. Then Big Bertha's frame tensed. The four men heard the distant drum of a horse's hoofs then and looked up inquiringly at her.

"That's what I been expectin'," Bertha said. "That there's him."

She didn't move until the horseman roared up to a halt in the darkness just outside the door.

Boot heels crunched in the gravel just outside. The batwing doors flapped inward. Duke Munns, close-set black eyes blinking in the light, didn't stop until he got to the bar. Then he saw Big Bertha. He stared, eyes bulging, thunderstruck! It was as if he were face to face with a ghost.

"Yuh—yuh're—*Big Bertha!*" he gasped incredulously. His short legs seemed frozen to the floor there in front of the shiny bar.

Big Bertha smiled a little. Nobody had ever seen her smile before. And it didn't seem quite right now. Her eyes were like points of ice.

"That's what they call me now—

Duke," she said finally. "Big Bertha —that's me now, Duke."

A shudder passed over Duke Munns' body as he tore his gaze away from the big woman's accusing eyes. He saw the four men at the keno table then for the first time. The spell broke.

Shrilling an oath, Munns' right hand blurred down for his gun. When it came up, he had Big Bertha and the four men covered. He edged back a step so he could watch everybody better. The muzzle of his gun wasn't quite steady.

"Fill me a canteen with water, Bertha," he rasped quickly. "I'm headin' south. I'm leavin' this damned Border." His words became jumbled, rambling, his voice ringing with triumph. "I got money—plenty of it now, big woman! I'll be in South America in—"

"You thought I was dead, didn't you, Duke?" Like a ghostly whisper Big Bertha's voice interrupted him.

Munns' black eyes took on a wild gleam.

"Git me that water, Bertha. I'll need water 'tween here an' my next stop across the Oven—"

"You stole all my money an' left me for dead," Bertha's voice droned on.

"Shut up!" shrilled Munns. "Shut up or I'll kill yuh again!" Sweat beaded his dark face, stark fear creeping into his eyes.

Big Bertha's eyes didn't leave Munns' face as she took a carpet-covered water can down from a peg behind the bar. She moved down to the far end of the bar where there was a large tank. There was a small faucet at the bottom. She turned it, filling the water jug. When it was almost full she screwed down the cap and handed it across the bar to Munns.

The gun in his right hand moved in an arc between Big Bertha and the four men at the table who were still standing with their hands in the air. He started backing to the batwing doors.

"I'm leavin'," he snarled hoarsely. "Don't try to foller me. I'll kill yuh if yuh try to foller me, Bertha. Keep these gents here."

Then he was gone, the batwing doors flapping emptily to and fro. From the table the four men ran to the bar, clawing for their guns.

Big Bertha stopped them by raising her hand.

One of the four men, a scarred-faced renegade, stared puzzledly at Big Bertha.

"I'll git him for yuh if yuh say the word, Bertha."

Big Bertha shook her head. When the hoof beats had died in the distance she said:

"He won't get far. I don't want you to gun him. His hide belongs to another gent. I'm thankin' you though, boys, for offerin' to help."

Wagging their heads, the four renegades returned to their table. Big Bertha again leaned over the bar on her fat arms.

"He won't get far," she said enigmatically. "He won't get far into the Oven."

BERTHA became silent then. She was still standing there staring at the door when the rapid beat of hoofs broke the quiet of late night for the second time. At the table the four out-trailers leaped to their feet, guns bristling from their fists.

"There he comes back," the scarred-faced outlaw rumbled. "I'm gonna gun him this time."

Big Bertha didn't turn her head.

"That there ain't him comin'. Sit down, you bums, an' keep your paws away from your guns or I'll throw you all out."

The rider roared up just in front of the saloon. Tom Rice, eyes blazing in his taut-muscled face, banged through the batwing doors. There was a gun in his right fist.

"Yuh seen him, Bertha?" Rice rapped, voice crackling. "Yuh seen a yella-bellied killer that calls himself Duke Munns? I figgered he'd stop here. He was headin' down this way."

"You figgered right, Tom. He was here a minute ago. I filled his jug

for him, then he tore outa here on the trail south."

Hot anger flared into Rice's eyes.

"Yuh filled a water jug for him. Yuh *helped* him!"

Big Bertha's face was inscrutable as a mask. She nodded. "I filled it for him."

"Why, dammit—" Rice bit back the condemning words.

He whirled, cursing, ran out the doors into the darkness. He hit the kak on his bronc in one leap, jammed home the spurs. Out across the mesquite he rode straight south. The heavy gloom that precedes the dawn was lifting. The break of another day was at hand. Another day when the sands of Hell's Oven just south of Bertha's Saloon would bake in the merciless heat of the sun.

But Tom Rice didn't think of this thing as he urged his bronc deeper into the Oven. He had one obsession that blinded him to all else: the gunning of Duke Munns!

Tom Rice in his desperate ride into the sands of Hell's Oven on Duke Munns' trail didn't know that another rider had followed him into Big Bertha's Saloon. She got to Big Bertha's place just as dawn was breaking. And Big Bertha didn't seem surprised to see her. She strode quickly out from behind the bar.

"Come on, Ruth Benson," she said grimly. "We're ridin' south!"

CHAPTER V

Count of Three!

RICE didn't remember when the sun came up. But when his leg-weary bronc stumbled and almost fell, he dismounted and went on through the clutching sand that sucked at his boots.

Overhead the sun, like a fiery red ball, beat down on Rice and his bronc. Blinded by the glare he stumbled on to the south where the tracks of another man and horse had gone on ahead of him through this endless inferno.

Rice's eyes were crimsoned, like colored beads. His boots and the horse's hoofs made a monotonous crunching sound that beat with maddening regularity into his ears.

He kept looking ahead, hoping that from each barren rise he topped, Munns would come into view. Towards noon he saw a tiny oasis jut up out of the sands just ahead of him. Finally he followed Munns' tracks up to it.

"Water," he panted. "I gotta—have—water!"

He realized then his mouth was parched. His words sounded fuzzy, voice unlike his own. He found three gnarled and runted cottonwood trees. There had been water there once. The little hole where it had stood was crusted and cracked.

He shook his head to fight off the sleepiness that crept over him. The sleep of no awakening. He cursed himself, mumbled crazily and staggered on. Hours of living hell! Long periods of time when he remembered nothing.

"I'll git him, Pap!" he mumbled drowsily. "I'll—"

The words choked in his aching throat. Every muscle of his lean body screaming out in agony, he pitched forward to the ground. Somebody was laughing at him, taunting him.

Dazedly, Rice lifted his head, and stared to the front through the haze that was before his eyes. Then—again the hideous laugh rang out.

Rice knew it was Duke Munns. Frantically he pulled himself to his feet. He saw Munns then, just ahead of him, staggering toward him on his stubby, wobbly legs—a gun in his hand! His eyes, his twisted, bloated face didn't look human.

Ten feet apart the two men stopped, stood with guns in their fists, staring at one another, their red eyes feverish with hate.

Tom Rice spoke first.

"I'm gunnin' yuh—Munns! Lift yore—"

Like an insane man, Munns flung his two arms into the air, screeching hoarsly, like a catamount.

"Listen—Rice—I ain't got shells! *My gun's empty!*" The nails of his fingers clawed into his heat-purpled face. "Don't kill me! Gimme a chance!" he blubbered. "Don't shoot me down—Tom—like a dog! Gimme a chance!"

Rice tried to steady his swaying body. As the meaning of Munns' words seeped into his dulled mind, he reached down with numb fingers to his gunbelt and removed two cartridges. He tossed them to the ground at Munns' feet.

"Snakes don't usually git—chances—Munns! But I'm—givin' yuh—an even break. I'll start—countin'—yuh murderer—" He lifted his own gun shoulder high. It felt like so much lead.

"I'll—count three— Then fire!"

Desperately, his fingers fumbling, Duke Munns was jamming the two shells into his gun. Then he clicked shut the loading gate and lifted his gun up to his shoulder like Rice. His eyes glowed with cunning, treachery. But Rice didn't see Munns' eyes then. All he saw was the vague outline of the weaving figure. Then he barely heard his own voice starting the count.

"One!"

A roar came to Rice's deadened ears. Another. His body jarred, lurched forward. Duke Munns hadn't waited for the count of three! He had fired point blank. Rice heard that horrible laugh again even as he started to fall forward to his knees. Strange but he didn't feel any pain from Munns' bullets. Yet he knew he'd been hit. He saw Munns staggering drunkenly toward him, laughing like a maniac.

Rice cursed. Like a leaden appendage his gun hand lifted. From his knees he pulled himself back up to his feet. Munns was almost on him. Then the gun in Rice's right fist spurted flame—twice. Munns faltered. His knees buckled and he went down—dead before he hit the ground.

The smoking six-gun still in his fist, Rice stood over the sprawled figure of the man who had killed his father. He stood there for several moments in the blinding sun light of Hell's Oven, staring down. His left arm hung limp at his side, blood dripping from the tips of his fingers. The left shoulder of his flannel shirt showed a crimson spot that kept growing larger.

"I got him, Pap," he mumbled.

Then he stooped, lifted the canteen that had been strapped about Duke Munns' shoulders. Somehow he managed to unscrew the cap at the top. He lifted the canteen to his lips. But he lowered it without drinking. In dazed bewilderment he s t a r e d through the small top at the sparkling, tantalizing liquid in the can. Then he tossed it beside Munns' body and the watery looking fluid gurgled into the sand. He laughed hoarsely and began talking as if the dead man could understand him.

"Yuh couldn't have gone much farther, Munns. Bertha filled—yore jug with—*kerosene!*"

Then Rice wheeled clumsily about and started over the back trail that would lead to Big Bertha's. Twice he fell to his knees in the sand. And twice he pulled himself back up to his feet and staggered on through the dripping hot sands.

Only a m a n of superhuman strength with muscles like strands of steel could have held up as long as he did. But he didn't go over a hundred yards until he fell for the last time. It must have seemed like miles to Tom Rice—that hundred yards. He didn't rise this time, or move. And overhead in the cloudless sky a black buzzard kept circling.

TOM RICE blinked open his eyes. The first person he saw was Ruth Benson. Then he saw the huge form of Big Bertha, kneeling beside him.

"Tom!" whispered Ruth Benson. "Just lie still, Tom. We're at the

(Continued on page 135)

Steve Wade Went into Fast Action After

THE HOLDUP

By BUCK BENSON

Author of "Gamblin' Guns," "Alive and Kicking," etc.

WHEN Steve Wade slid out of the saddle he heard the girl scream. An instant after his boot-heels dug into the ground, he was running toward the ranchhouse. His hand swooped down, snatched the heavy Colt from his holster as he pounded up the porch steps.

Light gleamed from the half-open front door, but the rest of the porch was in shadow darkness. Wade reached the door, pushed it open with his right foot.

As it swung back, a gun roared from inside the house. Wade saw a spurt of flame, felt the bullet brush his cheek as it sped by. The heavy Colt in his hand leaped up with the jerk of his arm. He fired as he caught a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy figure ducking through a doorway; heard his bullet smash into wood.

Again the girl screamed, the sound dying away in a muffled gasp. Wade heard a gruff shout and then the thumping of heavy feet running toward the rear of the ranchhouse. The waddy raced in the direction of the sounds, the gun ready in his hand.

He reached the kitchen and then halted. The place was in darkness, but the back door was open. As he stood there, irresolutely, he caught the clatter of galloping hoofs. He leaped to the door and peered out into the night, just in time to see a rider dashing away. The shadowy figure held something in his arms, and a lead horse followed his mount. Wade cursed as he recognized the riderless roan—it was his own horse!

"They got the gal!" exclaimed the waddy. "Kidnapin' her, I reckon."

He waited, expecting to see other riders follow the first horseman, but no one appeared. Cursing under his breath, Wade realized that the man would be out of sight before he could rope and saddle a horse from the ranch cavvy corral, and be off in pursuit.

To Steve Wade all that had taken place from the time he had first heard the girl scream had come as a startling surprise. He had ridden up to the ranchhouse of the Box A spread in search of a job, and had found himself evidently blundering in on a kidnaping.

"SEEMS to me I better take a look-see," said the puncher softly. "I ain't rightly shore what this is all about."

He turned from the door and started back through the house. There was an oil lamp burning on the table in the living room. Abruptly Wade paused and stood listening. From behind a closed door he had not noticed before, there came a faint thumping sound.

He went to the door and drew it open.

A grey-haired man lay bound and gagged, huddled on the floor of a small closet. It had been the thumping of the man's heels that the waddy had heard. Swiftly he released the

gag and then began to work on the knotted ropes.

"Who are you?" demanded the grey-haired man. "What happened? Did he get Betty?"

"'Fraid so," answered Wade. "I heard her scream an' come bustin' in to see what was wrong. Some jasper took a shot at me. I fired, but he ducked an' I reckon I missed him clean. Before I could git to the back o' the house, he'd taken the gal an' started ridin'. Stole my hoss, too. My name's Wade—Steve Wade."

"I'm Jim Patterson." The elderly man got to his feet. "I own this spread. Betty is my daughter." His tone grew tense. "We've got to find her, Wade. There's no tellin' what that devil will do."

"Then you know who kidnaped her?" asked Wade eagerly.

"Yeah," Patterson nodded. "It was my foreman, Tim Carroll. I fired him this mornin'. There's been rustlin' goin' on an' I found a runnin' iron in his bunk. He robbed me o' the payroll and stole Betty in revenge."

"Nobody but you an' yore daughter here at the house tonight?" demanded Wade.

"That's all," said Patterson. "Spring roundup now, yuh know. All the boys are out on th' range gatherin' up th' herd."

"Figgered they might be," remarked Wade. "Yuh got an idea where Carroll might 'a' taken the gal?"

"No." The rancher dropped weakly into a chair. "He might head for the hills, but we got to try an' trail him, Wade."

"Right. Yuh figger yuh might be able to ride out and round up some o' yore rannies? I'm heading fer th' hills right now. Not much chancet o' trailin' Carroll and the gal in the night time, but I may pick up their tracks come mornin'."

"O' course I kin ride," exclaimed Patterson. "I'll git the boys and foller yuh to the hills. I don't think Carroll has been doin' his rustlin' alone. He's probably got a bunch o' mean *hombres* with him. Git goin', boy."

Dawn found Steve Wade riding into the foothills far to the west of the Box A. As the sun broke through the clouds, the waddy began to look about for trail signs. He gave a muted shout of delight as he discovered the prints of horses' hoofs in soft dirt. Beyond was hard ground, but the tracks led up a dim mountain trail.

Half an hour's steady riding brought him to a wide ledge running along the side of a mountain. He reined his mount abruptly as he caught sight of four riders in the ravine below. Evidently Patterson had been right. Two more of the rustlers had joined Carroll. There was no longer any doubt in Wade's mind when he saw that the fourth rider was a dark-haired girl—and the waddy saw that she was mounted on his roan.

Her arms were tied behind her back, and the man who rode beside her was leading her horse.

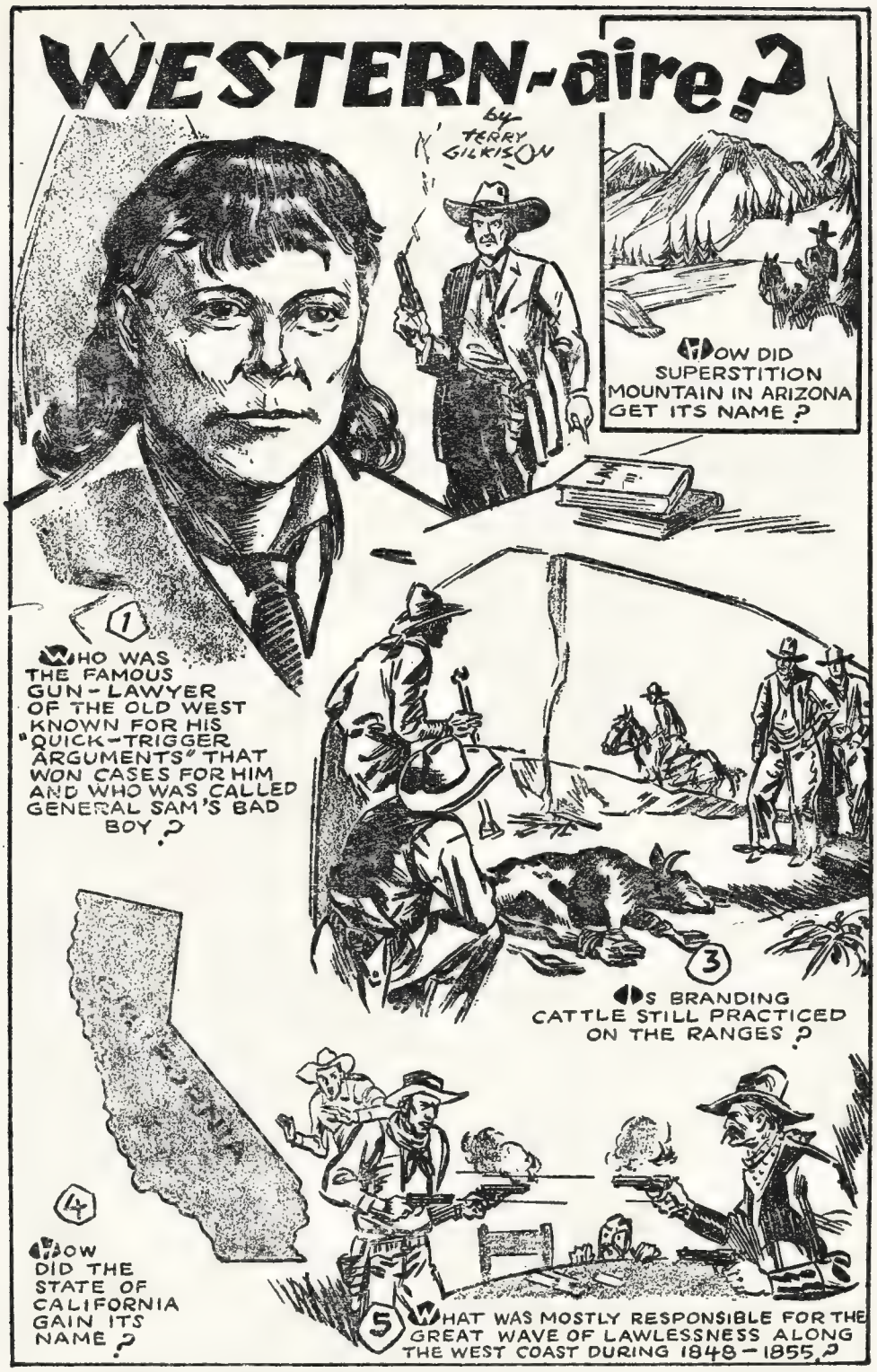
THEY were about two hundred yards back in the ravine, riding south, and Wade realized it would be only a few minutes before they would pass through the gully beneath him. There was no time to ride down the trail and try to head them off; and from where he was now, they were too far away for accurate shooting with a six-gun.

It was a sheer thirty-foot drop to the bottom of the ravine beneath him, but Steve Wade had to get down there in a hurry. He swung out of the kak and released the rope that hung on the cantle. As he fastened the rope to the saddle horn, he hoped devoutly that the horse he rode would be well enough trained to stand still.

He slid down, found that he was ten feet from the ground, and then dropped.

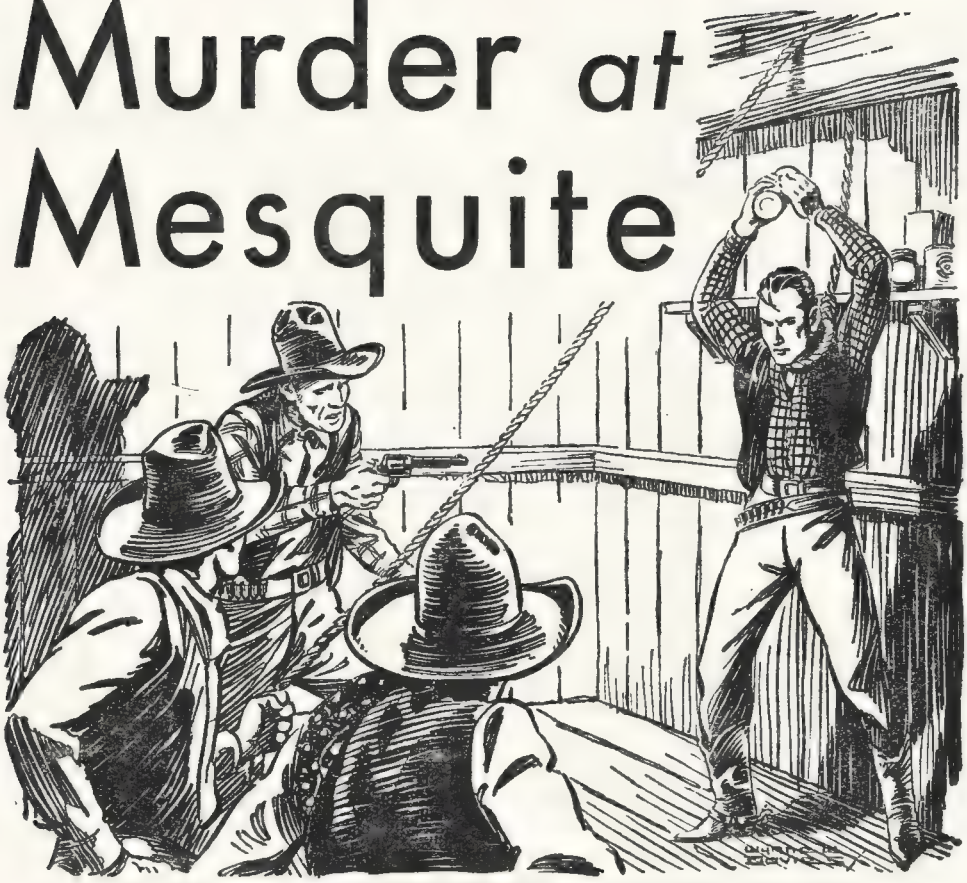
He was behind a boulder with a gun drawn when the three outlaws and the girl came riding toward him. His gun flamed and the first rider reeled back in the saddle. The man had been leading the girl's horse,

(Concluded on page 144)


WESTERN-aire?
by TERRY GILKISON
HOW DID SUPERSTITION MOUNTAIN IN ARIZONA GET ITS NAME?
1
WHO WAS THE FAMOUS GUN-LAWYER OF THE OLD WEST KNOWN FOR HIS "QUICK-TRIGGER ARGUMENTS" THAT WON CASES FOR HIM AND WHO WAS CALLED GENERAL SAM'S BAD BOY?
3
IS BRANDING CATTLE STILL PRACTICED ON THE RANGES?
4
HOW DID THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA GAIN ITS NAME?
5
WHAT WAS MOSTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GREAT WAVE OF LAWLESSNESS ALONG THE WEST COAST DURING 1848-1855?

Try to answer these five questions. If you can't corral 'em, turn to page 134 for the answers—but try first!

Murder at Mesquite



The fiber rasped Speedy's throat, but his feet hit the floor again

Flaming Hate Heads Speedy Martin to Death Via the Rope Route—but His Quick Wits and Ready Guns Turn the Tables!

By EVERETT WEBBER

Author of "Robber Roundup," "The Flying Doom," etc.

"WATCH that registered sack!" old Jim Manning, driver of the Mesquite stage, yelled as the old Concord careened onto the rutted, icy expanse of Buzzard Hill.

Speedy Martin, the guard, who had been peering anxiously ahead into the fine, wind-whipped snow, threw a glance back at the mail sack. It was safe under its icy lashings.

"Thutty thousand in that, didn't Cap'n Houser say?" Old Jim went on, expertly drawing the skittering, stiff-kneed horses from the raw cutbank that loomed fifteen feet at the right. "Cost us our jobs to lose that. Yuh'd be better off outlawin' it again—"

Crack! Crack! A rifle exploded raggedly up on the bank almost over Speedy's head. Old Jim, clawing at his face, lurched to his feet, and with a wild cry plunged over the side of the box. Speedy, horror-stricken,

snatched at the lines, but in the same split second the off-lead horse pawed the air and dropped with a woman-like cry in a convulsive, kicking heap. The rampaging coach ran the other horses to their bellies in a wild tangle of harness, slewed around, and crashed down the steep declivity to the left of the road.

Speedy, clutching and grabbing at the seat, was hurled in a crazy arc into a pile of ice-coated rocks fifteen feet away. Half stunned, jaw, nose and forehead bleeding from the ice, he staggered to his feet, clumsily going for his lashed-down guns.

"Drop 'em!" a razor-edged voice snarled behind him.

Speedy let the guns slide from his fingers, for death was writhing in those words. As he lurched around, his angry grey eyes met the maw of a six-gun. Behind it was a pair of black pupils set in yellowish white above a neck-cloth mask.

SPEEDY knew those eyes. They belonged to the most ruthless killer he had met while making the long ride—to a man who had no compunction whatever against taking human life. He could see where the man had slid down the cutbank.

"Smoky!" Speedy blurted.

"This ain't no social hour," Smoky snarled sarcastically. "A crooked move an' I'll blow hell outa yuh."

Speedy came slowly up to the road, going around the wrecked stage coach. Ten yards back, Old Jim was sprawled shapelessly on the frozen ruts. Speedy's face jerked as he started toward the old man.

"Stop!" Smoky snapped.

Speedy turned, his eyes hard, ugly, vengeful.

"Yuh'd as well finish me and be done with it," he told the outlaw, his brain whirling crazily. "Yuh shot a harmless old man in the back and yuh'll pay—"

Smoky jerked the neck-cloth mask down, his yellow teeth bared in a wolfish, snarling leer, his eyes narrowed to crafty gimlet points.

"Yeah?"

The word rattled hollowly in Speedy's consciousness, roused a flaming hate in his soul that disregarded consequences. Slowly, moving like a man in a dream, his eyes burning into Smoky's, he moved toward the outlaw, his fingers clawlike, his body leaning forward from the hips. Smoky's leer never wavered. Suddenly he laughed—a harsh, cold laugh like a bullet going through glass.

"Listen, yuh fool, don't yuh see I could kill yuh? I ain't, if yuh don't crowd me. I got reasons fer not. Remember that stage carryin' bullion yuh wouldn't help me ambush that time? Well, I'm evenin' the score. Punishin' yuh fer that—*by leavin' yuh alive!*"

The words cleared Speedy's brain like a dash of cold water. He stared at the outlaw in surprise.

"Why—"

Smoky laughed again. "Yuh think I'm crazy? Well, I ain't. Turn around—*pronto.*"

Speedy, suddenly realizing how near death he had been, slowly turned. There came the ripping of cloth as Smoky cut into the mail sack. Speedy knew from his exclamation of delight that he had found the money. Smoky whistled shrilly, then, bringing a big black gelding from beyond the next bend. The animal shied from the dead horse and man, pranced gingerly as the killer caught him and clambered into the worn hull.

Like a wraith in the snow, with a final mocking laugh, Smoky cut down the hillside due north toward Moose Lake three hours' ride away.

Speedy ran to Old Jim, then, but there was nothing he could do. The old driver never knew when he hit the ground. Speedy, holding his lips tight against his teeth, put old Jim's hat over his dead face, and turned quickly away.

Two minutes later, lines cut down to bridle length, his guns recovered, Speedy was on the bare, cold back of one of the stage horses, riding the trail of Smoky Joe. If Smoky Joe ever reached the wild fastnesses about Moose Lake, Speedy knew, he could hide for days.

Speedy was well acquainted with the country—had hidden there himself after foolishly running away from a self-defense killing. There had been no witnesses, and, hearing that a murder warrant was out for him, he had struck for the hills. Three years on the long ride brought him to his senses, though, and, aged far beyond his twenty-five years, he surrendered. The jury gave him a year in jail.

Then, just two weeks ago, Cap'n Houser, owner of the stage line, had been successful in getting enough names on a petition to free Speedy after he had served only half his time. The captain had not stopped at freeing him from jail. He had given him a job as a stage guard, with promise of something better in the future. Few people liked the crusty old skinflint, but he had befriended Speedy, and the young guard appreciated it.

And now, Speedy thought bitterly, he had let the old man down. Failed him. Lost not only harmless, good natured old Jim Manning, but the money as well.

"I got to catch Smoky," he mumbled through cracked, frozen lips. "I got to catch the dirty son—an' today or never."

His words were clipped short as something crashed into the back of his head. Clutching awkwardly at the horse's neck, he slid off the animal's back into the sifting snow. Jagged flashes of lightning played before his eyes and he slipped into unconsciousness.

SNOW had drifted over him when he awakened. His brain throbbed dully and pain shot through his body at every heartbeat. At first he did not realize what had happened. Then, with a start, memory came back. He tried to thrust himself to hands and knees, but his stiffened muscles seemed numb, frozen. Slowly, with the last ounce of his strength, he clutched at the horse's leg and giddily struggled to his feet.

He saw then that the blizzard had strengthened, and that only the big boulder that loomed there had kept the freezing wind from making his unconsciousness permanent.

The bandit's trail was gone in the falling snow, but Speedy knew that it would undoubtedly lead on to Moose Lake. Three hours' ride—and dusk was near.

Clambering onto a rock, he swept the snow from the saddle and crawled aboard. Waves of nausea came over him as the cold animal started stiffly forward. He twisted numb fingers into its mane to keep from toppling off.

The horse, finally warming a bit, broke into a stiff trot, but presently Speedy pulled up, struggling to an upright position as he strained his ears, eyes and face tense, for the sound he thought he heard. Then it came again, whipped along on the wind—the beating of horses' hoofs on thin snow.

Teeth chattering from the cold, Speedy stared to the left. At last he could see three men riding toward him. It was with relief that he made out the big roan of Lem Teeter. Then he saw that the other two men were Cap'n Houser and a barfly called Nance Townley. Speedy desperately hated to meet Houser, but he realized that the four of them would have a much better chance of finding Smoky Joe than he would alone. Some passing rider, he knew, had found Jim's body and the wrecked stage and had carried the news to town.

With exclamations of surprise, the three men swept up and drew their horses to a stop. Speedy nodded a terse greeting.

Houser, icicles frozen at the ends of his wilted, grizzled mustache, glared at Speedy with unconcealed hatred and anger. Speedy reddened, shifting on his horse's back.

"Givin' up, huh?" Lem Teeter demanded, jerking out a six-gun. "Makin' it easy fer us. Well, it won't help yuh a bit. Take 'is gun Nance."

Speedy, staring into the grim, purposeful eyes of the men, realized too late the meaning of Smoky's words: "I'm punishin' yuh by leav-

in' yuh alive!" These men thought he had robbed the stage, killed old Jim.

Speedy cursed himself silently. A fight, he knew, would be hopeless—not only an admission of guilt, but a quick way to Boot Hill, for only Lem's thumb, on the drawn-back hammer of his gun, lay between Speedy and eternity.

"Well," Houser ground as Speedy felt his guns drawn away, "ain't yuh goin' tuh say anything?"

"What's the use? Seems I'm done tried and convicted—"

"Tried, convicted—and sentenced," Nance jerked out. "It's a hangin' verdict, yuh low-down, murderin' skunk."

"Give the signal to the other boys, Cap'n," Lem requested. "An' you search 'im, Nance. This is one killin' that won't end with a pardon an' a nice soft job to boot."

"Yuh needn't rub it in," Houser growled. "Yuh said yoreself, Lem, that yuh thought he'd go straight—"

"Reckon I was wrong. That there signal was three shots followed by two."

IN silent anger, his mind futilely racing for some means of escape, Speedy allowed Nance to search his pockets as Houser raised a gun and sent the shots crashing into the sky. With a grunted oath, Nance withdrew his hand from Speedy's pocket, a wad of bills clutched in it. Speedy stared in surprise at the yellowbacks.

"Three hundred," Nance exclaimed, running through them. "He's cached the rest somewhere."

Lem prodded Speedy with his gun. "Where is it?" he demanded. "Where is the money? Yuh was broke this mornin'. Nance heard yuh bummin' a dollar ahead o' yore wages offa Cap'n Houser—right after the Cap'n told yuh an' Jim to be careful o' that thirty thousand of the Empire Cattle Company—"

Speedy shook his head. "I don't know nothin' about it," he told Lem. "If yuh want to know, that stage was held up by Smoky Joe Galatas. He shot Jim and knocked me out when I started after him. Circled on his trail an' got me from behind. Reckon he put that money on me—"

"Rats!" Houser exclaimed disbelievingly. "Let's git to the cabin before we freeze."

Ten minutes later, Speedy's hands tied before him, they reached a cabin. Smoke was pouring into the falling snow from the flue, and four horses were under a lean-to shed.

"We'll tend to yore hoss, ranny," Lem observed, dropping the bridle to Speedy's mount. "Take 'im in, Cap'n."

Speedy, his wrists still bound, stiffly slid to the ground and walked ahead of Houser into the cabin as the door was jerked open.

"We caught 'im," Houser announced in grim triumph.

"See yuh did," one of the men observed.

Speedy ignored the hostile gazes of the four possemen and walked over to the stove which was beginning to warm. Back to the wall, he looked about the place. He recognized a coat on the far wall as one that Pete Horn, an old miner, had worn into town two days ago. This was evidently his cabin.

With a start, Speedy remembered a small, red-labeled can old Pete had been so careful of as he entered the stage to ride out home. Nitroglycerine! Speedy's eyes swept the room, found what he sought on a shelf across the room, safe away from the fire.

"Got 'im without no trouble," he heard Houser saying. "Tried to run a bluff on us. Claims Smoky Joe Galatas did the job."

"Smoky Joe!" another exclaimed. "Why, he helt up the bank at Beaver Springs yesterday, accordin' to the telegraph. He couldn't be here today. That'd mean he'd been ridin' all night an' all mornin'—and he wouldn't a-done that. He'd be holed up, come daylight."

"Shore he would," another agreed.

Speedy remained silent, knowing it would be useless to tell them that the safest riding of all for an out-

law, was through a snow storm. By steady riding, Smoky could have reached the scene of the holdup, even after the Beaver Springs robbery.

The outer door opened and Lem and Nance came in.

Reckon we'd as well git it over with," Lem grunted. "It's gittin' dusky. Is there a rope anywhere?"

The words screamed along Speedy's backbone and crinkled under his scalp. Vainly he struggled at the ropes that fastened his hands.

"Shore," Nance was saying. "There is rope over on that peg. We gonna eat first or hang 'im first?"

Bill Potter, one of the other possemen, put the smoky chimney on the lamp he had lighted. "Le's hang 'im first. After that I'll be ready fer my share of the two thousand dollars reward you was offerin' fer Jim's killer, Cap'n. Le's see, six intuh two thousand—"

"Six?" Houser repeated coldly "*I* helped in the capture. They's seven of us—"

"Yuh mean yuh're sharin' in yore own reward?"

"I certainly do. Three hundred dollars is three hundred dollars. I got the mortgage money I'd collected from the X Bar X jest afore we started after Speedy, an' I'll pay yuh when we git done."

Lem Teeter nodded. "I ain't worryin' whether I git a reward or not—"

"I'll keep it, then," Houser told him.

"Do," Teeter invited levelly.

Houser colored a bit. "I—I figger we ort to draw straws. Them as has to dig the grave won't have to pull on the rope."

Speedy felt sick. His clothes were sticky with the sweat that was hot and wet along his back.

"Ground's too hard to dig a grave," Burt Digby objected. "We'll put rocks over him an' all pull on the rope. Bring 'im over here, Lem."

Speedy's first impulse was to dash wildly among the men, kicking and butting and slashing with his bound hands. There was the bare chance that he might thus escape. At worst, it could bring only merciful death from a bullet instead of death by the rope route.

Then, with an effort, he steeled himself to calmness, coolly glanced over the men. Houser was clutching a cocked gun in his wrinkled fist as Lem Teeter tied a hangman's knot in the rope. Others were drawing guns.

"Step out," Teeter ordered calmly, his face a mask.

"Git 'im over by the wall, there," Houser snapped. "May take him half an hour to git plumb dead an' we don't want 'im yere in the middle o' the room."

TEETER nodded, tossing the rope over a rafter. Slowly, his eyes steel pin-points, Speedy walked toward Teeter as the men prodded him with the guns.

"Keerful!" Nance warned. "He might snatch one o' them persuaders."

In a moment the rope was around Speedy's neck and he turned, backing imperceptibly toward the wall, facing the men. Teeter drew on the free end of the rope until it was taut.

"Any last words?" Nance asked.

"I think," Speedy said coldly, "that it's customary to say 'I'll meet yuh in hell' in a case like this. But I ain't sayin' that because I ain't headed fer there—yet—"

With a lunge, he whirled, reaching upward with his bound hands as, in surprise, Teeter jerked on the rope. Speedy was snatched roughly as the fiber rasped his throat, but his feet hit the floor again and he twisted triumphantly, the can of nitroglycerine in his fingers.

"Pull again!" he choked. "When yuh do—I drop this can, an' when it hits it'll blow the bunch of yuh straight to hell."

The men paled, going back from Speedy in precipitate haste. Lem Teeter dropped the rope.

"Reckon he's got us," he jerked out.

"Yuh couldn't be satisfied till yuh turned 'im loose!" Houser gritted. "Lettin' 'im git that nitro, yuh

durned brainless, paper-skulled idiot."

"Who said git 'im over by the wall?" Teeter demanded.

"I did—but yuh let 'im jump four feet after that can—"

"Shut up," Speedy snapped. "I'll do the talkin'. Unhook yore gun-belts an' lay 'em down easy. Remember—if any of yuh shoot me, this can'll hit the floor when I do."

Slowly, still muttering curses, Houser let his gun belt fall and the others followed suit.

"Turn around," Speedy ordered.

In a moment, as they did so, he had picked up a gun. "All right, Lem. Open the cellar."

Teeter slowly did so and Speedy herded the men into the Stygian blackness below. He kicked the lid down, then threw the heavy bolt and hurried over to a table where there was a butcher knife. Holding it between his feet, he sawed his wrists free.

AFTER selecting two .45s from the pile on the floor, he hurled the rest of the guns far out into the gathering darkness. Hastily realizing that the cellar would not hold the cursing men long, he saddled Lem Teeter's roan and headed north into the freezing wind, his body aching from the cold.

Once or twice he paused for a second, but there was no sound of pursuit in the gloom behind. His trail would be hard to follow, he knew.

Groping for a plan to capture Smoky, he rode on. Unless he could find the outlaw, he couldn't show up in town again—or any other town. It would be the dreary long ride for him again.

Darkness closed down like a cold blanket, and with it the wind fell. Then the snow stopped and ten minutes later the moon broke through a cloud, lighting up the frozen country in a bath of silver. It made traveling easier, but it would also make it harder to evade a posse.

His neck—a raw, oozing welt at one side where Teeter had jerked the rope—was paining him, but it had stopped bleeding. He was hungry, desperately so, but—

He stopped midway of the thought. Smoky Joe might be hungry, too. He had traveled far since the day before, and he had packed no visible grub. Nor had he had time, since coming from the scene of the robbery at Beaver, to cache a food supply around Moose Lake. That meant that he was relying on his wits to carry him through.

But the blizzard, Speedy knew from bitter experience, would keep all small game in cover. Once, he had been saved by calling up a moose. And right now, he figured, Smoky Joe would look more than kindly on a big moose steak.

Timber loomed up ahead, and when Speedy finally rode through it to the lake, pursuit was not yet in sight. This time, he knew, the posse would not bother to take him alive. They would shoot from cover, perhaps without warning. So would Smoky Joe. Running up on him would mean instant and complete annihilation with a six-gun.

Presently Speedy found a birch and began the slow, freezing work of peeling off a section of bark. But at last he succeeded without breaking the frozen stuff, and rolled the sheet into a rough horn which he raised to his purple lips.

Filling his lungs, he sent the long plaintive *moo-a-a-a-a* of a cow moose across the lake. The blast would carry for miles in the high, still air, and penetrate to the deepest lair in the place. A minute later, he sent the feverish cry out again.

He rode on around the rim of the lake, bearing northward, for he figured that Smoky would not stop until he reached the better hiding place there. He knew, too, that the outlaw, thinking he was stalking a moose, would come silently, shooting the first moving object he saw.

He raised the horn again. *Moo-a-a a-a! Moo-a-a-a-a!* Winded, he rode on. Then, to Speedy's consternation, the raucous bellow of a bull moose split the night. And the bull was

to the north of the lake—undoubtedly nearer Smoky than he was. That meant that the outlaw would kill the bull, get his meat, and be gone before Speedy could get there. And he might hunt for hours before finding the carcass and, consequently, Smoky's trail.

His only hope, he realized, lay in calling the bull sufficiently near to himself that he could reach it before Smoky could take any meat. He raised the horn again, and again the old bull answered.

Speedy kept the calling up for half an hour as he rode swiftly forward. Hope began to dim a little as the bull kept answering, for he feared that Smoky would already have shot him had he intended to. Or perhaps Smoky was stalking it, trying to get a shot. Finally the animal became quiet. Speedy cursed dismally for fear it had sensed his presence and fled.

Then, ahead—

"Smoky Joe!" Speedy gasped. His nerves went taut as he saw the man on his big black horse. And even as Speedy looked, the outlaw, not yet spying him, raised a moose horn to his mouth and the raucous bellow of the bull split the night!

With the speed of light, one of the big peacemakers at Speedy's hips leaped into his hand, and with its thunder the moose horn was torn from Smoky's lips.

"Elevate, Smoky!"

Smoky's reply was the blast of a six-gun, and Speedy felt hot lead fan past his cheek. Both Speedy's hands jarred then as twin flames streaked from his gun, but Smoky had already dropped beyond his horse. Instinctively, Speedy slid from his own mount. As he did so his horse, at another shot from the outlaw, gave a piglike squeal and thundered away.

Speedy fired at the streak of flame, then dropped behind a small boulder and squirmed into a clump of icy brush that skirted the rock. A bullet splattered against the rock and whined away into the night as the clear crack of a rifle came to Speedy's ears. The young stage guard moved silently onward toward Smoky's hiding place.

Then a shadow flitted from the rock where Smoky had been, and, lurching to his feet, Speedy yelled, "Stop, Smoky!"

The outlaw turned ten yards away, guns belching. Lead tore into Speedy's left leg and his own guns exploded as he went back. He staggered, raising his guns again, but Smoky, with a gurgle deep in his throat, tottered and collapsed.

He was staring crazily, his ugly face twisted with pain, when Speedy reached him. Breath coming in great, audible gasps, Smoky was still conscious; but, before Speedy could search him, mounted men charged out of the brush. Speedy backed against a tree, drawing his guns as Lem Teeter and Houser leaped from their mounts.

"Easy!" Lem snapped. "Reckon the shootin's over."

"By grabs!" Nance exclaimed in surprise. "It's Smoky Joe, all right. I knowed Speedy wasn't guilty—"

"Like hell yuh did!" another mocked.

SPEEDY'S angular face twisted in a wry grin as he recalled Nance's eagerness to hang him.

Nance, a bit crestfallen, went on, "That *hombre* got enough rewards on him to retire us fer life."

"To retire Speedy fer life," Lem Teeter shot back. "All we are is a pack of ignoramuses. Yuh owe Speedy two thousand yoreself, Cap'n Houser—"

"Yuh ain't proved Smoky done it," Houser disagreed doubtfully. "I cain't jist go around slingin' out money 'thout proof."

A bleak smile crossed Speedy's features as the old captain's innate stinginess came to the fore. With blinding flashes of pain shooting from his wounded leg, he knelt by the half conscious outlaw and a moment later brought out a thick sheaf of bills. Running swiftly through it, he handed it to Lem.

(Continued on page 132)

Bill Kirk Holds Rustlers at Bay with a

Hideout Gun

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Hat Trick," "Rustler Valley Law," etc.

BILL KIRK'S fist smashed out, and Manuel reeled back, blood oozing from a cut lip. Kirk then caught his wrist, twisted it cruelly, forcing Manuel to drop the knife. Kirk's left flashed out. Manuel lost his balance and thudded to the floor.

"Any o' you *hombres* want tuh finish this up?" snapped Kirk, his head hovering close to the butt of his Colt.

The four other men in the saloon glared at him, but they remained motionless. Porky Waters, the barkeeper, nervously twisted a damp rag in his pudgy hands.

"Ain't no call fer yuh to get so proddy, Kirk," said big Walt Montez. "Yuh claim that Manuel was one of two jaspers yuh seen rustlin' some of yore beef last night. When yuh tells the Mex 'bout it—he tries tuh get yuh with the knife. Yuh give him a good lickin'." The big man smiled. "No reason fer yuh tuh figger we wanted in on th' play. Come on, fellers, let's likker up."

Kirk moved over and stood passively against the counter as the three men moved up to the bar. Manuel groaned, sat up, looked about him dazedly. He saw the knife lying on the floor and began to crawl toward it.

Abruptly Montez' gun roared—the bullet plowing into the Mexican's heart.

"Reckon that settles it," said Montez. He turned to the barkeeper. "Drinks, Porky," he ordered.

The barkeeper hastily reached up on a shelf, drew down a bottle of whiskey and a glass. Kirk swung around to the counter as Waters placed a glass in front of him. Montez poured himself a drink and then shoved the bottle along to Kirk.

"Thanks," said Kirk as he picked up the bottle.

Abruptly something hard crashed down on his head—and he felt his gun being snatched from the holster. Dimly he realized that he had forgotten to watch the other two men as he sprawled face downward across the bar.

"Then—then yuh *are* th' rustlers—" stammered Porky.

There was a look of terror on his face as Montez' gun roared, and then the barkeeper collapsed behind the counter.

"We better git out o' here," snapped Montez. "Sheriff mighta heard th' shootin. He ain't figgered we been doin' th' rustlin' 'round here."

Montez and the two other men turned toward the door. Suddenly a hand caught the big man tightly by the gun arm, drew him back. Montez felt something hard gouging into his back.

"Don't move," snapped Kirk behind him, "or I'll shore plug yuh!"

The other two men whirled and saw that Kirk was holding Montez in front of him as a shield. They hesitated, guns half drawn. They didn't see the middle-aged man with the star on his vest who had come quietly through the swinging doors. It was Sheriff Perkins.

(Concluded on Page 131)

He heard a click

SCARS and STARS

Something Made Twitchy Halt His Plan for Revenge —and then He Learned the Truth!

By

CLIFF WALTERS

Author of "Gun Gauntlet," "Yellow Lightning," etc.

THE wind blowing across the bleak December hills was as keen as the hate in the heart of the man riding against its glacial sting. But it was neither hate, cold nor anticipation of revenge that caused the rider's thin lips to twitch. It was a habit resulting from the bullet scar at the corner of his mouth, a habit which had been responsible for his nickname, "Twitchy" Gannister.

Topping the barren, wind-swept ridge which formed the south boundary of Flint Creek Valley, Twitchy reined into a patch of tall cedars. Grey eyes hard and narrowed, he looked down upon the house and corrals belonging to Joe Sproul: the man who, five years ago, had put that bullet scar on his face.

At last he started angling down the hillside, wondering, as he had wondered for five years, just what method of killing Joe Sproul would be most

Sproul lay bound

satisfying to one who had brooded long on bitter thoughts of revenge. Dismounting behind the barn, he made his way afoot around to the cabin door. He wanted to surprise Joe Sproul.

He did. The big, iron-grey man in the cabin looked up quickly from his task of peeling potatoes.

"Howdy, stranger!" he called.

"Stranger?" the visitor repeated. Then, with his left hand, he pushed back the low-drawn hat; turned down the jaw-enveloping collar of his sheepskin coat.

Sproul stared. "Dave Gannister!"

"Twitchy, they call me now," said the visitor, a metallic inflection in his voice. "The punchers over to the JH Six have called me that ever since the day yore bullet nicked me in the cheek an' mouth."

"My bullet—" Sproul echoed. "It seems a long time since that night they robbed yuh, Dave. Took that JH Six payroll off'n yuh."

"They?" Twitchy rasped. "Yuh mean—you! Yeah, an' that masked pard o' yore'n. The pard yuh saved by nickin' me when I started to kill him!"

"HE wasn't my pard," Joe Sproul denied.

"Yuh're a liar, as well as a thief!" Twitchy blazed, hand close to the gun swung at his hip. "They tell me you own this Flint Crick ranch, Sproul. Yuh wouldn't, though, if yuh hadn't got away with that two thousand dollars o' JH Six money."

"Yuh been on my trail fer five years?"

"No!" Twitchy growled. "Harkins, the boss o' the JH Six, thought the holdup was framed. That I was in on the deal. So he give me the choice o' goin' to jail, or workin' out the two thousand shortage. Well, I worked it out. And then rode away on yore trail—broke!"

"Now yuh're here to kill me?"

"Why not?" Twitchy countered. "Yuh've got it comin'. Besides, Mr. Sproul, I've found out that when yuh was deputy sheriff over in Banjo Basin, yuh killed my Dad! Murdered him! Is that right?"

Sproul's voice was low as he answered, "Yeah. That—that's right."

"Yeah! An' yore alibi for doin' it was that Dad was Bandanna Bill, the outlaw. That's a lie, Sproul, an' yuh know it. Bandanna Bill was the skunk that held me up the evenin' I was packin' the JH Six payroll. The *hombre* yuh saved by shootin' me. Bandanna Bill was yore pard. An' you holdin' down a deputy sheriff's job!"

As Twitchy spoke, an angry pallor crept around his slightly disfigured mouth. His eyes became narrowed slits of smoked agate. Then the .45, gripped by his tense hand, slid slowly up out of its holster. Here was the moment he had waited for.

"Don't kill me yet, Dave," Sproul entreated. "Give me time enough to tell yuh that—"

Maybe Twitchy thought Sproul was reaching for a butcher knife lying close by on the crude table. The visitor sprang, bringing the barrel of his six-shooter down hard on the other's head. Sproul grunted, and sprawled off the chair to the cabin floor.

Twitchy grabbed a short rope, bound his prisoner's hands—and waited. But the moment consciousness began returning to the injured man, the visitor pulled a bandanna out of his pocket and growled:

"Yuh liked Bandanna Bill so darn well, maybe yuh'll like a mouthful o' bandanna—cinched up tight—like this!" He gagged his victim.

The fiends of revenge were dancing in Twitchy's eyes now. He brought forth his saddled horse, threw a lariat on Sproul and started dragging the prisoner up the draw above the cabin; a narrow ravine filled with dried brush and the stumps of a few dead cottonwood trees.

Twitchy rode quite a way up the draw before he stopped his horse.

"I'll leave yuh here, Sproul," he said. "But don't worry 'bout bein'

cold, even with winter dusk comin' on. Yuh'll be hot enough purty soon. Plenty hot. Yuh'll git a taste o' the hell yuh're a-goin' to—after yore carcass is nothin' but ashes!"

He loped back down the dusk-filled draw again, halted and touched a flaring match to a tuft of dried bunch grass. The puff of flame, whipped by the December wind, soon enveloped an adjacent brush clump. Smoke and crackling sparks began spreading up the draw where lay the helpless Sproul—the man who had killed the elder Gannister; who had wounded Twitchy.

Then Twitchy was up in his saddle again, and heading out of Flint Creek Valley. He was riding up the ridge when a tall, lone cedar growing on the brow of the hill caught—and held—his attention.

Behind the pointed tip of that cedar the brightest star in the sky was poised; and two more scintillant stars appeared to be dangling from other branches. Twitchy halted his horse and stared at that star-adorned tree—and found himself looking back across the years.

"I'd forgot this was—was Christmas Eve," he mumbled blankly.

Still he sat there, staring at the cedar, and remembering the old cabin where he was born. He recalled other cedar trees, decorated with silver stars made of tinsel. And suddenly he remembered the frail little woman who had helped him hang up his stocking in that old cabin; what she had told him about Christmas as she sat there beside him in front of the stone fireplace where dancing flames—

Flames!

There was a mist over Twitchy Gannister's eyes as he whirled his horse. Then he was spurring back toward the draw where fires were leaping—and where a helpless man lay tied.

He attempted to spur his snorting horse through the dense smoke and fire that veiled the mouth of the draw. But to no avail. The roan balked, reared and pawed the air with protesting front feet. Twitchy swerved his mount up the draw's left embankment and raced over rough ground to win against the flames sweeping along below him.

At last, even with the spot where lay Joe Sproul, he jumped from his saddle and half fell down into the ravine over a low ledge of rock. He scrambled to his feet and staggered, lungs filled with acrid smoke, toward the man who lay there bound and gagged.

He ran past an old cottonwood—and something gave beneath his left boot. There was a loud click. Jaws of steel clamped around his ankle. But Twitchy, jerked hard to the ground, could still reach Sproul. Stretching his arms to their fullest extent, he jerked the bandanna from his victim's mouth; untied the ropes that bound the latter's hands and feet.

"Git out!" he yelled to the freed man. "That fire's gittin' closer—"

Because of his desperation, he forgot the fast-approaching flames, and that his left foot was gripped in jaws of steel. He made a lunge to reach the bank down which he had come.

A chain snapped taut. Twitchy was jerked down again, the side of his head colliding with a jutting rock. Now all the stars in the heavens seemed to be swirling madly before his dazed eyes. The crackling, spitefully hissing flames came on.

IT was several minutes later when Twitchy opened his eyes again. He saw Joe Sproul and another man standing beside him there on the ridge above the flame-filled draw. He tried to move, but his head was light—and a deadening ache was numbing his left leg and foot.

"Who—who got me outa—that hell?" he mumbled.

"Joe Sproul mostly," answered the stranger. "I seen the fire, an' got here in time to help him a little bit."

"I tried to call to yuh when yuh come bustin' down there to save me, Dave," Sproul said. "But I couldn't talk. Couldn't tell yuh I'd set a bear

(Continued on page 130)

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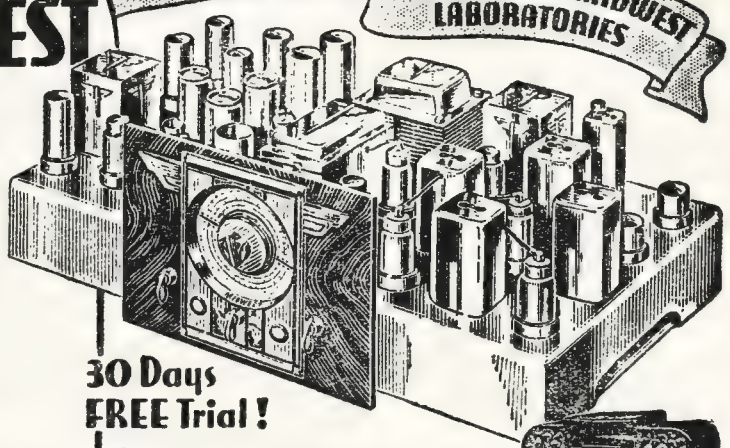

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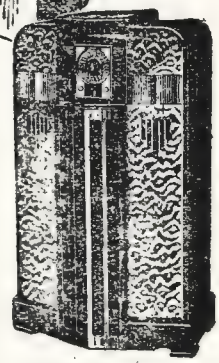

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ON SALE EVERYWHERE

(Continued from page 128)

trap by that old cottonwood that was full o' wild honey."

Twitchy's eyes blinked vacuously. "Why did yuh git yoreself all scorched up savin' my hide?"

"I might ask you the same question," Sproul answered slowly. "But if yuh want to know, I'll tell yuh what yuh wouldn't give me a chanct to tell yuh before. Yuh see, I promised yore dad once that I'd look out for yuh."

"You killed my Dad!" Twitchy replied. "Shot him down, an' then you claimed he was Bandanna Bill, the outlaw!"

"I shot him by mistake," Sproul explained. "I thought he *was* Bandanna Bill. They look a heap alike. You kin see that fer yoreself. Look." And he pointed to the man standing beside him.

"Yeah," Twitchy admitted at last. "This gent, if he's Bandanna Bill, *does* look a lot like my Dad used to."

"They're brothers," Joe Sproul went on. "That's why I couldn't let you kill yore own uncle that evenin' he was tryin' to hold yuh up fer the JH Six payroll. I promised yore dad when he was dyin'—an' forgivin' me—that I'd look after his son, an' his brother. Not that I aimed to hit yuh with that bullet, Dave."

Twitchy gaped. "What become o' that payroll money then?"

"Bill Gannister an' me kept it—kinda," Sproul replied. "I told Bill here that night that yore dad wanted him to go straight. Bill has. We bought this little outfit here with the JH Six money, an' we've got quite a little bunch o' cattle started."

"So that's what yuh call goin' straight!" Twitchy answered. "I said yuh deserved to die, Sproul. Yuh do. What about them five years I spent in workin' out a debt to the JH Six? Slavin' to pay back money I didn't steal? An' to top it all, havin' the other men thinkin' I was a crook?"

Sproul smiled. "This Flint Crick place an' cattle don't belong to me an' Bill. They're in yore name, Dave. An' the reason we let yuh keep on

slavin' at the JH Six was because, 'fore that holdup, yuh'd draw yore money every month an' go on a big stem-winder. We've saved it for yuh. And I've kept my promise to yore dad."

"This is my outfit?" Twitchy said.

"Yore'n," said Bill Gannister, his uncle. "If Joe Sproul killed yore dad by mistake, he's done his best to make up fer it. If yuh're able to ride to town, an' check up on the ownership o' this place, me an' Joe'll be ridin' on to new ranges. I don't reckon yuh'll want either one of us hangin' around. Not after the hand we've both had in—"

"Better stick around, both o' yuh," Twitchy interrupted. "We all make mistakes. Like I did when I went Piute an' tried burnin' Joe up. Will yuh shake, Joe?" He put out his hand.

"Shore!" Sproul answered, a trace of huskiness in his voice. "But I still don't savvy why yuh come back here tonight an' tried savin'—"

But Twitchy, his face illumined by a smile, was looking off across the hills toward a ridge and saying:

"Funny how stars a million miles away could look like they was hangin' on a cedar. But I'm glad they did. Mighty glad."

HIDEOUT GUN

(Concluded from page 125)

"What's goin' on here?" the sheriff demanded.

"Reckon yuh caught th' rustlers," said Kirk. "They killed th' barkeep an' th' Mex. Guess Montez figgered Manuel might talk."

Kirk breathed a sigh of relief as more citizens crowded in. He had been afraid that the three rustlers would start a gunfight.

"I shore was makin' a bluff," he said, "when my hideout gun warn't nothin' but this." He revealed the bottle in his hand.

"Looks like this time th' drinks are on these three jaspers," grinned the sheriff.

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MURDER AT MESQUITE

(Continued from page 124)

"Fifteen thousand," he said laconically. "He's cached the rest somewhere."

"What's that paper that fell?" Nance asked.

With a frown, Speedy picked it up, unfolded it, and read:

November thirty-first without fail, two-o'clock stage.

"Why," Houser exclaimed, "that's today. He's got a confederate—somebody who knowed that money was—"

Smoky Joe struggled up on one elbow, consciousness wavering into his eyes.

"I—told yuh—we'd orter—kill—him—"

"Told who?" Speedy demanded.

"Told—Houser—we'd orter kill yuh—at the stage—"

At his words, he settled back with a groan.

To Speedy's amazement Houser leaped toward his horse with a snarling curse. He dragged out a gun, firing wildly into the group as he mounted. Nance, clawing at his arm, staggered backward and sat down. At the same time, Speedy lunged after Houser, clutching at the man's gun hand. As he did so, a revolver thundered behind him and the old stage owner plunged from the horse.

Speedy caught his limp figure, easing it to the ground, but Houser, drilled cleanly between the eyes, was stone dead. Speedy turned away as a big bubble of blood welled up from the man's mouth, and burst in the wind.

"I had to do it," Lem exclaimed dolefully. "I had to do it."

Speedy, taut-faced, nodded wordlessly.

In a moment one of the men was searching Houser, bringing forth a small bundle of money and a large one. Lem took them, running through them as Speedy watched.

(Concluded on page 134)

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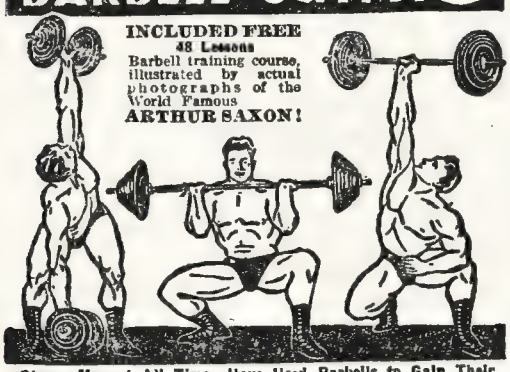

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(Concluded from page 132)

"Three thousand yere," Lem said. "That's what he'd collected from the X Bar X when we met him jest after startin' tuh look fer—fer old Jim's killer—an' he joined us. An' this is the other fifteen thousand from the stage money."

"The dirty son!" Nance exclaimed, nursing his wounded arm. "He had this all planned when he got yuh from jail, Speedy. That there's his handwritin' sayin' 'bout the two o'clock stage."

"Shore," Lem agreed. "He knowed people would be ready to think bad o' yuh after yuh bein' in jail. An' he told yuh about that thirty thousand before witnesses so he could prove yuh knowed it."

"I reckon," Speedy said gruffly, "we'd better hit fer town. Smoky's hit high. He'll live, but he needs a doctor. Reckon I could use one, too."

"Smoky"ll be all right," Nance predicted. "He's plenty tough—and a crafty old coyote, too."

"Shore," Lem agreed, "but a couple minutes on the end of a rope'll cure him o' that."

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 117

1—Temple Houston, son of the famous General Sam Houston of Texas, was known as the GUN-LAWYER. He claimed to be the "most eloquent orator to ever shoot up a courtroom" and during the '80s helped to make Western frontier history famous and notorious.

2—The Indians in the region near "Superstition Mountain" located in Arizona, believe that the mountain is taboo since a bloody massacre there by the Apaches. So frightful was the massacre that all Indians at the time believed that if they touched the mountain they would die. Many other superstitions have been coupled with it and Indian maidens of great beauty are thought to inhabit the mountain top.

3—In many states the practice of branding cattle is still used as a means of identification, and to enable inspectors at the slaughter points to trace the ownership of any diseased animals.

4—Spanish followers of Cortez, conqueror of the Aztec, gave California its name. They selected it from the novel "Las Serges de Esplandian," which described a fabled island named California where precious stones and gold were to be found in abundance.

5—Shortly after the war with Mexico, when gold was first discovered in California, the peaceful law-abiding settlements of the West Coast were overrun by unruly, gold-crazed hordes which brought on a wave of lawlessness and crime. During the ten years that crime ran rampant in San Francisco there were over 5,000 murders and 1,000 suicides. Normal conditions were gradually brought back by the Vigilance Committee.

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THE TRAIL SOUTH

(Continued from page 114)

oasis. We'll wait here until dark, then take you on back to the Double Bar. We heard the gunshots and rode up just as you fell."

She kept talking. Her voice was like soothing music to Rice's ears. But the happiness that shone in her tear-misty eyes told him more than anything she might say. He just lay there on the blanket in the shade of the cottonwoods and watched her, a wry grin on his lips.

"Yuh've been—wonderful, Ruth—you an' Bertha," he murmured. "I'm just wonderin' if you'll—go back to the—Double Bar with me as my—"

BIG BERTHA, sitting in the sand beside them, brushed a hand across her flushed face and snorted.

"Will she? That's all she's talked about for the last hour, Tom!"

Ruth Benson, holding Rice's hand in her own, blushed and laughed happily. "Yes, Tom," she whispered. "And—and Bertha is going to be the bridesmaid!"

Bertha just grunted embarrassedly. "Aw, hell now," she grumbled.

Rice's face grew serious. "Duke Munns—?" he began.

"He's—he's dead, Tom," Ruth Benson said.

Big Bertha nodded. "You've squared that account, Tom. While Ruth was luggin' you back here I kinda buried him. He had ten thousand dollars in cash in his pocket that crooked Sheriff Link paid him thinkin' he'd get your ranch. I got that there money right here with me. It'll be yours, Tom—"

Rice shook his head.

"Huh, huh, Bertha. I don't want that money. I figger that it belongs to you for all you've done for Ruth an' me."

Big Bertha was drawing circles in the sand with her fat fingers.

"Guess I will just keep it then, Tom, if you don't want it," she said

(Concluded on page 144)

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HOWDY, *hombres* an' *hombresses!* I'm mighty proud o' the int'rest yuh've took in the HOME CORRAL and of the heap o' letters here on my desk tuh prove it. It's got so I can't answer 'em one by one, like I used tuh do. So I'm pickin' out a flock o' them, all askin' purty much the same questions about this here Resettlement Administration.

What I'm about tuh remark, therefore, is addressed in pertickler tuh the followin' folks:

T. L. S.	Grand Coulee, Wash.
G. C. J.	Post Falls, Idaho
M. C.	Devil's Lake, N. D.
R. T.	Gholson, Miss.
F. W. B.	River Forest, Ill.
B. D.	Center Sandwich, N. H.
"Bill"	Hamilton, Va.
W. S.	Oskaloosa, Kas.
H. T. H.	Hinton, W. Va.
C. R.	Sloan, Ia.
A. C. G.	Graw, Tex.
S. O. S.	Ridgley, Tenn.
C. F. W.	St. Mary's, Mo.
J. C. E.	Paducah, Tex.
M. F. P.	Madera, Calif.
M. M. W.	Phoenix, Ariz.

Now look close over that tally, folks, tuh see if yore brand is among 'em. Because I'm plumb in earnest in aimin' tuh round up information an' advice for yuh about the "Resettling America" movement promulgated by Mister Rexford G. Tugwell of Washington, D. C.

It Ain't Simple

It ain't by no means a simple job.

Seems like there's more red tape in guvment business than haywire on a Pike County shed roof. Look at the experience of J. C. E. of Paducah, Texas. He started in tuh untangle red tape and wound up pickin' cotton. Just read over his letter:

Dear Doc: I read what you told about the Rural Resettlement project in POPULAR WESTERN magazine and I want to know more.

I filed application with the Rural Rehabilitation at Roswell, N. M., over a year ago. Then I asked to be transferred to Arkansas.

When I got to Arkansas I was told my application couldn't be accepted because I was a legal resident of New Mexico. So we started back to New Mexico. (And this gent has a family o' 14, folks!)

Here we are now at Paducah, picking cotton. We're making our eats. But picking will soon be over. What then? Back on relief? No relief? No, I'd rather make my own living.

I want to get started on the plan you tell about because it is time to start preparing for next year's crop, if one is going to raise a crop.

I am 46 years old and worked on farms all my life until the past five years. And I was a farm worker then when I could get a job. I have 12 children, nine of them with me, including a married daughter with two children. There's 14 of us in all, all living in a little two-room cotton pickers' shack.

If you can put me on the trail of a worth-while opportunity, I sure will appreciate it.

J. C. E.

Talk about the wanderin' tribes o' Israel! Here's a family that's been a-lookin' for the Promised Land and they're wonderin' if they'll be forty years in the wilderness

like Moses and his children before they strike the rock o' plenty at some new Horeb.

J. C. E. will be about as old as Moses, then, and with a lot o' guv'ment red tape tangled in his long beard!

Seekin' Information

Now what the HOME CORRAL has set out tuh do is tuh git hold of accurate and reliable information about this Resettlement plan for J. C. E., and thousands o' folks like him.

They are mighty anxious tuh learn how tuh git lined up so as tuh become part o' Mister Tugwell's Resettlers. The HOME CORRAL promised awhile back tuh bring their wants tuh the attention o' Mister Tugwell *and has done so.*

As things stand at present, the only hope on the horizon for the free homesteader is under this Resettlement plan.

Silent as an Owl

But so far Mister Tugwell's administration has been silent as a owl on a stump about the practical, workin' details.

Howsomever, here's a letter from Commissioner Johnson of the General Land Office at Washington:

There is now under consideration a proposed modification of the Executive Order (withdraw-

(Continued on page 138)

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☐ How to Invent and Patent	☐ Machinist ☐ Toolmaker	☐ R. R. Locomotives	☐ Navigation
☐ Electrical Engineer	☐ Patternmaker	☐ R. R. Section Foreman	☐ Cotton Manufacturing
☐ Electric Lighting	☐ Gas Engines ☐ Diesel Engines	☐ Air Brakes ☐ R. R. Signalmen	☐ Woolen Manufacturing
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BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES

☐ Business Management	☐ C. P. Accountant	☐ Service Station Salesmanship	☐ Railway Mail Clerk
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☐ Traffic Management	☐ Spanish ☐ French	☐ Lettering Show Cards ☐ Signs	☐ College Preparatory
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Name.....*Age*.....*Address*.....

City.....*State*.....*Present Position*.....

If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada

FALSE TEETH

60 DAYS TRIAL

Thousands of my satisfied customers all over the country know there is no need to pay big prices. I have been making dental plates for many years, by mail, and I have saved my customers thousands of dollars. Besides, I guarantee you satisfaction or they do not cost you one cent, and I take your word. Teeth made especially for you personally can be tried for sixty days. In one Pennsylvania town alone, 91 people are wearing teeth made by me, satisfied they have better teeth and saved money.

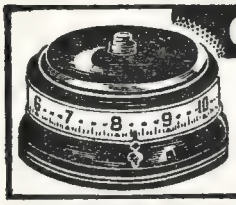
SEND NO MONEY

My plates are very beautiful to look at and are constructed to give life-long service and satisfaction. You can look years younger at once. They are made with natural-looking pearly white genuine porcelain teeth. Well fitting and guaranteed unbreakable. Remember you do not send one cent—just your name and address, and we send free impression material and full detailed directions. Be sure to write today for my low prices and complete information. Don't put this off. Do it today.

FREE

DR. HEININGER

440 W. Huron Dept. 350 Chicago



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Have you had the details of how this amazing Time Teller works and pays you Big Money giving it away FREE? Write fast.

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Tan SKINS, Make Up FURS

Be a Taxidermist. We teach you at Home. Mount Birds, Animals, Pets, common specimens. Save your hunting trophies; decorate home and den. Make genuine KROME LEATHER, tan and make up furs for spare-time profit.

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BEN TUROFF, Box 810 LEES SUMMIT, MO.

(Continued from page 136)

ing public lands from all forms of appropriation) which, if approved, will permit among other things the allowance of lease applications. (Under the grazing lease section) Due publicity will be given such an order if and when it is signed.

This Department does not publish a list or digest regarding the opportunities afforded under the public land laws.

It's beginnin' tuh look like yores truly will have tuh fork his cayuse and lope yonder tuh Washington for a personal look-see.

And folks, if I can make that pasear, yore many questions will be attended to for yuh proper. Horn-high and spur-deep.

So keep yore eye on the HOME CORRAL!

Tuh Help th' Dry-Gulched

This here department bound itself tuh be a *real* service. Something tuh help folks who've been dry-gulched by hard times. The object o' the HOME CORRAL is tuh point the way tuh that "more abundant life" promised by our President.

All yuh *hombres* and *hombresses* got tuh do tuh secure said benefits, as yores truly continues tuh dig deeper, is tuh SIGN THE POPULAR WESTERN CLUB COUPON and sent it in, along with yore letter tuh Old Doc Trail.

Some o' th' Letters

Now let's git along tuh some o' the letters here now.

R. B., a C.C.C. boy at Ashland, Kansas, wants tuh go tuh Lost Valley and start sheep-raisin'.

My answer tuh that, Bob, is that desert regions ain't gen'rally suitable tuh the woolly business.

J. A. F. of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, who also craves more information about Lost Valley will find most o' his questions answered in the last issue. The questions about acquiring grazin' privileges on same area answered in the above letter from Commissioner Johnson.

Where Most Cattle Are Raised

J. H. of Shawnee, Oklahoma, writes in to ask what the country is like down around Silver City, Deming and Lordsburg, New Mexico. And he also inquires:

"Where are the most cattle raised in the U. S.?"

Well, Jack, the closest I been tuh those

NEXT MONTH: Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts

in

PAINTED POST BRANDS

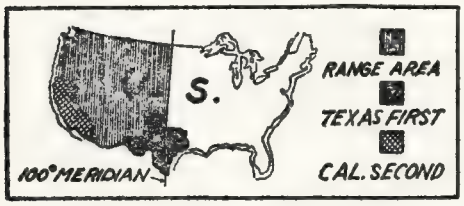
A Novelette

By TOM GUNN

The New **COLLEGE HUMOR** *Now 15c*

towns is El Paso on the south an' Socorro on the north. The Rio Grande Valley is a mighty pleasin' part but the surroundin' country is no treat tuh the eye. Rugged desert, mostly, and o' more mineral importance than fence-post enterprises.

About yore cattle question—the range area is generally considered as that part of



the U. S. west of the one-hundredth meridian, which runs through the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

At about Dodge City and North Platte.

Approximately 40 percent of the Nation's beef cattle are produced in this range area. The West is considered a range area because it has large areas o' land which cannot be economically cultivated, but will produce forage animals on native grasses.

Regions of the Range Area

The range area holds about half the total land area o' the United States. It is classified in four regions, as follows:

The Great Plains
Rocky Mountain
Intermountain
Pacific Coast

Accordin' tuh the latest guv'ment figures on beef production, west Texas produced the most. Next came California. In 1930 there were about 20 million head o' cattle in the range area, but before they are marketed a lot o' western cattle become "Corn Belt feeders" in the middle states.

One-Man Ranches

There is a drift in the range area towards smaller-scale beef production. What we call "one-man cow ranches." The big holdings are breakin' up in most localities through action o' inheritance laws, sale o' State-owned lands, and development o' irrigation projects.

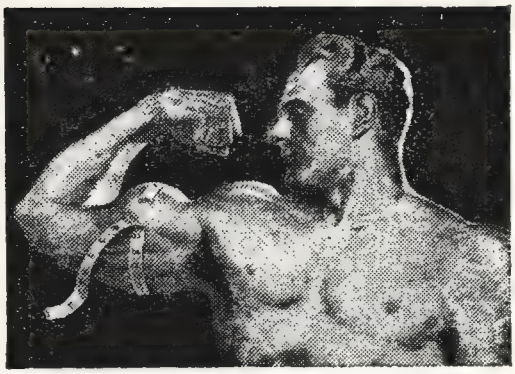
In other words, it looks like the times are favorable for the small feller tuh git intuh the cattle business.

But on the other hand monopolies are bein' created all over again by established ranchers buyin' up abandoned homesteads, especially in the northern tier o' states in the range area.

And the reason they're able tuh do this is on account o' the inexperience o' one-man outfits, which fail through bad judgment in the selection o' land, lack of hay land for winter feeding, and through water problems.

I've stated all this at some length, Jack, so yuh'll realize that experience is impor-

(Continued on page 140)



+ If you do **2** not add . . .

INCHES

TO YOUR BICEPS

THREE INCHES TO YOUR CHEST

. . . it won't cost you one cent!"

Signed: GEORGE F. JOWETT

TWO solid inches of tough, sinuous muscle added to your biceps . . . three inches to your chest . . . or it won't cost you one penny! That's my unqualified agreement!

You will not only increase your biceps, but every part of your body will be developed proportionately. . . . I'll show you how to add at least 3 inches to your chest. . . . I'll show you how to get lithe, muscular legs that will be columns of power for speed and endurance. . . . Your whole body will vibrate with muscular energy, pep and health! Wouldn't you like a he-man's bicep like the idealized figure above?

Take my full course, if it does not do all I say . . . if you are not completely satisfied . . . and *you* are the judge . . . it won't cost you one penny!

Send for "Moulding a Mighty Arm" A Special Course for ONLY 25c

It will be a revelation to you. You can't make a mistake. The assurance of the strongest armed man in the world stands behind this course. I give you my secrets of development illustrated and explained as you like them. Mail your order now while you can still get this course for only 25c.

I will not limit you to the arm or chest. . . . Try any one of my test courses listed below at 25c. Or, try all six of them for only $1.00.

Mail your order now and I will include a FREE COPY of "NERVES OF STEEL, MUSCLES LIKE IRON." It is a priceless book to the strength fan and muscle builder. Full of pictures of marvelous bodied men who tell you decisively how you can build symmetry and strength the Jowett Way! Reach out—Grasp this special offer!

FREE BOOK WITH PHOTOS OF FAMOUS STRONG MEN

GEORGE F. JOWETT
"Champion of Champions"
Winner of many contests for strength and physical perfection!

JOWETT INSTITUTE OF PHYSICAL CULTURE
Dept. 86Cd, 422 Poplar St., Scranton, Pa.

George F. Jowett: Send, by return mail, prepaid, the courses checked below for which I am enclosing——

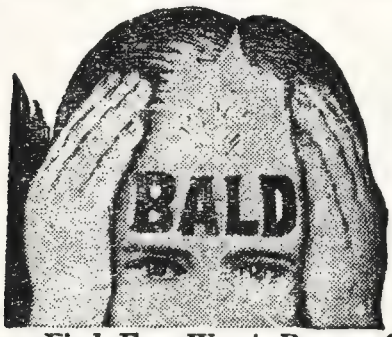
☐ Moulding a Mighty Arm, 25c
☐ Moulding a Mighty Back, 25c
☐ Moulding a Mighty Grip, 25c
☐ Moulding a Mighty Chest, 25c
☐ Moulding Mighty Legs, 25c
☐ Strong Man Stunts Made Easy, 25c
☐ **All 6 Books for $1.00.**

Name ——— *Age* ———

Address ———

At All Stands **COLLEGE HUMOR** *Now 15c*

WHY MEN GO



Science Finds Easy Way to Remove Germ In Superficial Layers of Scalp and Stimulate Dormant Roots to Promote Hair Growth

(Read Free Offer)

A germ called "Flask Bacilla of Unna" gets deep into the scalp skin in many cases of abnormal hair deficiency, causing a most dangerous type of dandruff. It clogs up pores and hair follicles, causing itchy scalp, falling hair, baldness and prevents dormant hair roots (papilla) from growing hair. Washing and shampooing does not remove the cause. It merely cleanses and treats the surface, rolling off the outer skin like water off a duck's back. No wonder baldness is increasing.

Now an important discovery enables people who have dandruff, falling hair, thin hair and baldness to easily remove the congested, thin outer layer of scalp skin. This permits opened pores and follicles to absorb air, sunshine and a blood-stimulating compound to activate the smothered, dormant hair roots in promoting hair growth as nature intended. It is all explained in a new treatise called "HOW HAIR GROWS," showing anatomy of your hair and tells what to do. This treatise is now being mailed FREE to all who write for it. Send no money, just name and address to Dermolav Lab., Desk 612-A, No. 1700 Broadway, New York, N. Y. and you get it by return mail free and postpaid. If pleased, tell your friends about it.

FOREST JOBS

available at $125-$175 per month, steady. Cabin. Hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify at once.

Get details immediately

Rayson Service Bureau, B-56 Denver, Colo.

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TREATMENT mailed on Free Trial. If satisfied, send $1; if not, it's Free. Write me for your treatment today.

W. K. STERLINE, 830 Ohio Ave., Sidney, Ohio

One Cent a Day Brings $100 a Month

Over One Million Dollars in cash benefits have already been paid to one-cent-a-day policyholders by National Protective Insurance Co., the oldest and largest company of its kind.

Their new policy pays maximum Principal Sum benefits of $4,000, increasing to $6,000. Maximum monthly benefits of $100 are payable up to 24 months. Large cash sums are paid immediately for fractures, dislocations, etc. Also liberal benefits are paid for any and every accident. Same old price—just one cent a day. Age limits for policy—men, women and children—ages 7 to 80 years.

Send No Money

For 10 days' free inspection of policy, simply send name, age, address, beneficiary's name and relationship. No application to fill out, no medical examination. After reading policy, which will be mailed to you, either return it or send $3.65 which pays you up for a whole year—365 days. Write National Protective Insurance Co., 404 Pickwick Bldg., Kansas City, Mo., today, while offer is still open.

(Continued from page 139)

tant in cattle ranching. It takes ev'ry bit as much shrewdness an' general business ability as runnin' any other kind o' factory. For that's what a cattle ranch is—a beef factory.

She-Taxidermy Schools

The gal-folks send in the hardest questions. Here's one from Lillian C. of Parkville, Minnesota:

Dear Doc:

I want to go West, Arizona or Colorado, to start a course in a Beauty Culture School. Will you tell me where, in either state, that there are schools of that kind? I prefer Arizona.

I feel plumb mournful at havin' tuh disappoint yuh, Lillian, but beauty schools are sort o' out o' my line. But there sure must be she-taxidermy outfits in the bigger cities.

Like I said, I'm better posted on brandin' irons than on curlin' irons.

A Prospectin' Machine

I wish there was room tuh print the excitin' letter about a new gold-gittin' machine which comes from A. F. F. o' Los Angeles. Yore mention o' black sand assayin' from $14,000 tuh $30,000 a ton mighty near had me packin' up and forkin' out there, friend. Me, I sniped through old placer beds myownself, with pan and rocker, so I know what it means in backaches tuh wash out a yard o' paydirt. Good luck, and I'm hopin' yore machine takes the backaches out o' prospectin'.

Anybody know the whereabouts o' Gene Antry, "Oklahoma Yodeling Cowboy" who

OLD DOC TRAIL,
POPULAR WESTERN
22 West 48th St., New York

DEAR DOC: I'm plumb anxious t' be a member o' th' POPULAR WESTERN CLUB. Yere's who I am:

Name .....

Address .....

City .....

State..... Age.....

Occupation .....

Ambition .....

I am enclosing a stamped self-addressed envelope. Send me a membership card.

NOTE: If yuh're headin' West, an' have questions for Old Doc Trail tuh answer, enclose letter with this coupon. 3-36

Don't Miss **COLLEGE HUMOR** *Now 15c*

sang at a Chicago radio station? Miss Lorraine S., Box 253, at Britton, South Dakota, wants tuh know. Mebbe Gene'll read this hisownself. Whichi'd be mighty fine, because Miss Lorraine says he's her favorite radio star.

Myownself, I wish radio programs in general was half as good as cowboy singers.

They got most other music talent beat, accordin' tuh my notion.

Tuggin' My Whiskers

Al E. reaches in from Jackson Hole—no, I reckon that's Jackson Heights, Queens, New York—tuh give pore ol' Doc Trail's matted whiskers a tug. He writes:

Dear Doc: On page 138 in the January HOME CORRAL you tell us that the temperature of boiling water drops about two degrees for every foot of altitude. Now if the boiling temperature drops two degrees for every foot you go up, that would make boiling water about 19,788 degrees below zero at 10,000 feet! It's sure cold in them thar hills, Doc!

Yuh got us, Al. What was meant is—for every thousand feet of altitude. Reckon the printer figgered I was such a dahgawned ol' liar and exaggerated things so frequent that he just up and whittled my thousand down tuh one foot.

Beans and Chili

Yore sure good-natured, Al, when yuh add: "The chili bean recipe sounds good

(Concluded on page 142)

CONTROLS Disease of Blood

An effective treatment against disease of blood. Used for 60 years. Home Treatment. Hundreds of Endorsements. Whatever the cause, however far advanced, write for FREE Book.

JOHN STERLING REMEDY CO.
Dept. 33 Kansas City, Mo.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF MARCH 3, 1933, of Popular Western, published monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1935.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

County aforesaid, personally appeared N. L. Pines, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of Popular Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor and business manager are:

Publisher, Beacon Magazines, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert.

2. That the owner is: Beacon Magazines, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 22 West 48th Street, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of the total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none.

4. That the two paragraphs next above giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contains not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustees or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders, who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds or other securities than as so stated by him.

N. L. PINES, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1935. Adrea Goldberg, Notary Public, commission expires March 30, 1936.

Next Month's Novel

THE HIDDEN TRAIL

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

Dr. Jas. M. Rainey

5000 TREATMENTS FREE this month

Do You Lack VITALITY —ENERGY 15 Days Supply FREE

of **DR. RAINEY'S V-TAL TABLETS**, used for more than 25 years for its excellent tonic and **stimulating effects**; also a box of splendid **LAXATIVES**. Do you feel tired, weak, run down, irritable? Is your skin pale and your blood weak? Have you shortness of breath, palpitation of the heart—do you suffer with attacks of faintness, indigestion and heartburn, sour stomach, constipation and distress after eating? Many of these ailments are often due to a weak, rundown condition. Then send at once for Dr. Rainey's full 15-day treatment of V-Tal Tablets, used and praised by thousands for over 25 years. **Just mail 10c** to cover postage, packing and handling. A regular $1 box of Dr. Rainey's V-Tal Tablets and a 25c box of Dr. Rainey's Laxatives will be sent you postpaid. There is no further cost or obligation of any kind. This is our way of introducing Dr. Rainey's splendid V-Tal Tablets. We give them to you gladly so you can convince yourself of their excellent tonic effect, and prove at our expense what they may do for you. Dr. Rainey's V-Tal Tablets by their tonic effect will help to build up your weak, rundown condition. Dr. Rainey's V-Tal Tablets contain no harmful or injurious drugs. The whole formula is printed on every box. Don't delay. Send for your free package today.

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THE RAINEY DRUG CO., INC., Dept. A-142
186 W. Lake St., Chicago, Ill.

Enclosed find 10c to cover postage, packing and handling charges. Please send me $1.00 box Dr. Rainey's V-Tal Tablets, improved formula. Also Dr. Rainey's Wonderful Laxatives. Both are to be free without further cost or obligation.

Name .....
Address .....
Town..... State.....

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PROSTATE

Gland Weakness

Nervous Debility, Frequent Night Rising, Leg Pains, Lame Back, Lumbago, Sexual Weakness, Kidney and Bladder Trouble, Chronic Constipation, Despondency, Restlessness at Night are only some of the ailments, differing in individuals, that can often be ascribed to lesion of the Prostate Gland.

THOUSANDS AFFLICTED

Thousands of men in every community suffer from these ailments, weaknesses and other physical shortcomings without knowing that very frequently they are caused by prostatic failure.

MANY DOCTORS ENDORSE MASSAGE

Massaging for the alleviation of Prostate Trouble is as old as time, and some of the most outstanding authorities in the medical profession recommend massage as a safe effective treatment. (See Reference Book of the Medical Sciences, Vol. VII, 3rd Edition.)

DR. W. D. SMITH
INVENTOR

USE "PROSAGER"

—a new invention which enables any man to massage his Prostate Gland in the privacy of his home.
It often brings relief with the first treatment and must help or it costs you nothing. No Drugs or Electricity.

UNSOLICITED LETTERS OF GRATITUDE

The following are extracts from letters received, which are on file in our office; the complete letters and addresses will be sent to anyone who is interested in inquiring for them.
Mr. B. A. Williams, Columbus, Ohio, writes in regard to the Prosager: "I am thoroughly satisfied with it and wish to say that if I could not get another, I would not take a thousand dollars for the one I have—if you desire at any time you can use my name in any way in any exploiting you might want to do with your product." Mr. Henry Zitman, Auburn, Indiana, says: "I will say this much for the Prosager, it has saved me from an operation. The Doctor that treated me before I got it says it is a fine thing to use. If there is any one in this territory that wants to know about it, direct them to me." Mr. Judson Trefethan, New Castle, N. H., writes about the Prosager: "I think it is a great invention, my Doctor came to see it and he said it was a good invention."

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MIDWEST PRODUCTS CO.
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Quit Using Tobacco!

Write for Free Booklet and Learn How.
Results Guaranteed or Money Refunded.
NEWELL PHARMACAL COMPANY
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100,000 Satisfied Users

EPILEPSY—EPILEPTICS!

Detroit lady finds relief for husband after Specialists home and abroad failed. All letters answered.
MRS. GEO. DEMPSTER
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Join our Club. World's Greatest Social Extension Bureau. Happiness awaits you, correspondents everywhere, seeking congenial mates. Quick results. Confidential service. Particulars FREE.
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Gallstone

Colic Pain, Stomach Distress, Pain in Right Side arising functional troubles Liver, Gallbladder, Indigestion, heavy load in stomach, tightness around waist, constipation, often quickly relieved with this Safe Home Treatment. Avoid operation if possible. Don't suffer longer. Send today for FREE trial. No obligation. Write Quick.

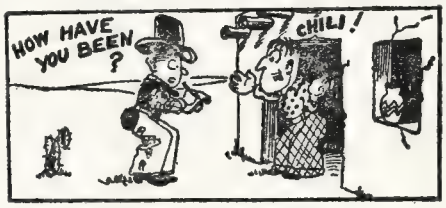
FREE TRIAL BOX

SOLVOTONE CO. 64R 4303 Cottage Grove, Chicago

(Concluded from page 141)

and goes right into the clipping book."

Did yuh ever hear that yarn about the relief investigator who went tuh a Mex-



ican's house? He pulled out a pad and pencil, and asks:

"What did you eat for breakfast?"

"Chili beans, senor," says the Mex.

"And for dinner?"

"Chili and beans."

"Supper?"

"Beans and chili."

"What, nothing else?"

"Hell, senor," says the Mex, "what else would one want?"

Join th' Club

Rannihans and rannigals, join th' POPULAR WESTERN CLUB, like I advised yuh before. They's a coupon on Page 140—fill it out, sign it and mail it in pronto.

YORE welcome.

No dues, no fees, an' th' membership card is yores for th' askin'. Yuh don't have t' be a cow-nurse t' join—whether yuh come from West or East, country or city, or even from across th' seas, horn in on our brand right away.

Important announcements for club members appear from time t' time—an' yore always entitled t' my personal advice on matter pertainin' t' th' great open spaces.

Next Month's Issue

Th' featured novel for next month is a humdinger—a rapid-paced yarn with thrills that'll give yuh some tense moments. It's called THE HIDDEN TRAIL, an' it's by JOSEPH F. HOOK. Gunfire and action on every page.

Th' novelettes are swell, too—SHOWDOWN GUNS, by yore old favorite WILTON WEST, an' PAINTED POST BRANDS, by th' cowboy author, TOM GUNN, who sure swings a wicked story lariat. An' in his latest yarn, PAINTED POST BRANDS, Sheriff Blue Steele an' Deputy Shorty Watts are at their fightin' best. In addition t' these stories—TWELVE others, every one a winner.

Coming soon in POPULAR WESTERN are TEXAS MAN, by H. Bedford Jones an' HOGLEG CANYON, by J. Allan Dunn—two grand novels yuh kin look forward tuh. Watch for 'em. I'll be back next month for another chat with yuh.

—OLD DOC TRAIL.

At All Stands **COLLEGE HUMOR** *Now 15c*

RAFFLES

The GENTLEMAN CRACKSMAN
**HUNTED BY THE POLICE—
FEARED BY CRIMINALS**
in

RAFFLES AND THE DEATH ROCKET

A Complete Novel

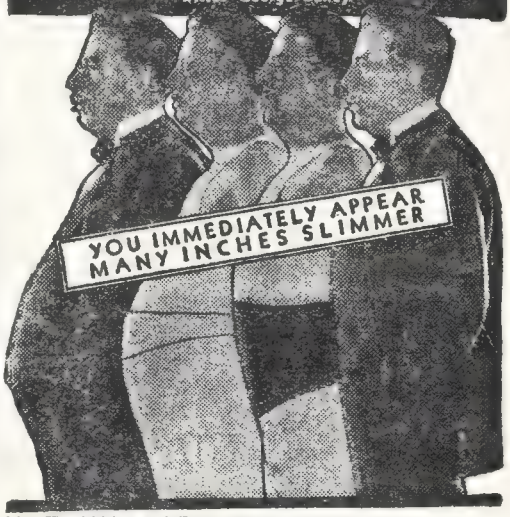
by BARRY PEROWNE

A Masterpiece of Mystery — and It's Only One of the FIFTEEN *Gripping Stories in the March*

POPULAR DETECTIVE

146 Pages — 15c At All Stands

"*I have* REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES WITH THE WEIL BELT!"
writes George Bailey



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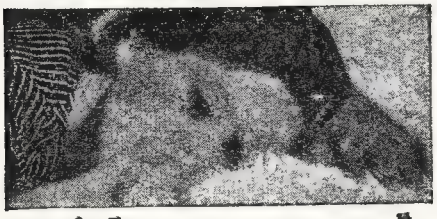

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THE TRAIL SOUTH

(Concluded from page 135)

slowly. "Just guess I will. You know, it's kinda funny but that's just about what a gent stole off of me one time. Funny thing is he was my husband, too. We was married an' livin' in Durango. I wasn't as hefty then as I am now. But he married me for my money—I see that now. He was a no-account minin' man. Take another gulp of water from the jug there that I brought along, Tom. One day he come home an' shot me—left me for dead an' took all my money."

Tom Rice stared at her shrewdly, eyes narrowing.

"An' yuh've never given up hope of findin' him some day, have yuh, Bertha?"

"I have now, Tom," she said tonelessly. "He's dead."

THE HOLDUP

(Concluded from page 116)

and as he released his grip the animal turned and galloped back down the ravine.

Wade fired again as the other two rustlers sent bullets spattering the rock behind which he crouched. A man went down. The last man swung out of the saddle and advanced with hands held shoulder-high—a cigarette still dangling from his lips.

"All right," he called. "Yuh got me. I ain't aimin' tuh die yet."

"Yuh're smart," Said Wade as the man came closer. "Keep them hands right where they are."

"How'd yuh trail me an' th' girl so easy?" demanded Carroll.

"Hoofprints," said Wade.

"But th' country's covered with 'em," exclaimed the foreman.

"Shore," Wade grinned. "But when yuh steal a feller's hoss—like yuh did mine—yuh want to be shore that hoss hasn't lost a shoe!"

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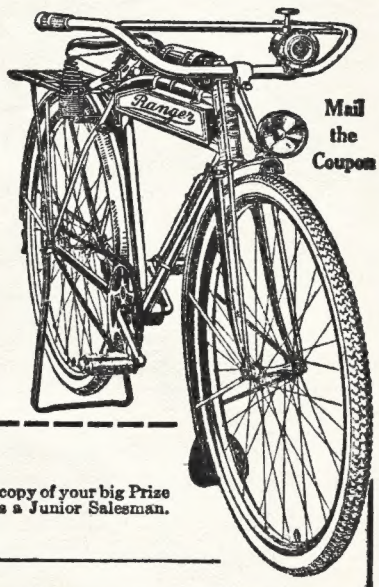

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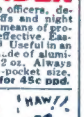

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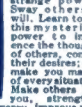

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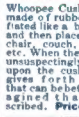

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NATURAL Methods Are All I Need

On this page you will see an actual photo of how I look today. This picture has not been changed in any way. No muscles have been "painted on." This photograph is the camera's honest proof of what I have done for MY body. I myself am ready to prove what my secret of *Dynamic Tension* can do for yours!

To look at me now you wouldn't recognize me as the same man I used to be. Then I was a physical wreck, a 97-pound weakling—flat-chested, spindly legs, arms like pipe stems.

I was worried—and I had a right to be. I decided to study myself, to do something about my body. Then I made a discovery. I found a new way to build myself up. A way that was simple, natural, quick and sure! "*Dynamic Tension*" is what I called it. I put this secret to work. And in a short time I had the kind of body you see here—the body which has twice won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

This Sterling Silver Cup Being Given Away

This valuable cup stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base.

I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

This Secret Has Helped Thousands

Thousands of other fellows now know this secret, too—and know from their own personal experience what *Dynamic Tension* has done for them. When they turned to me for advice, they were just as frail and puny as I once was. Now they are life-sized examples of what a man *can* and *ought* to be—with mighty energy, tireless endurance, and muscles that stand out like bridge-cables all over their bodies.

I have written an interesting booklet, filled with pictures, which tells my story—and theirs. I would like to send you a copy of it entirely free.

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